

Witness to Change

Cooley Shrair Adapts to an Evolving Legal Landscape

By GEORGE OBRIEN

The Springfield-based law firm Cooley Shrair marks 60 years in business this fall. The company has witnessed considerable change in the business landscape — and in its own size and shape — over that time. It owes its longevity to the ability to make adjustments to everything from new tax laws to telecommunications technology.

The offices of the law firm Cooley Shrair, P.C. speak to another era in Springfield's history.

Many of the walls feature old photographs from the 1920s and '30s, when trolleys still ran down a crowded Main Street. That's when the Haynes Hotel was in its heyday (named for owner Tilly Haynes, it was later the site of the downtown landmark Tilly's restaurant). The firm now occupies the fifth floor of that facility, which closed years ago, with many of its offices and conference areas, complete with exposed brick and sloped ceilings, carved out of old hotel rooms.

"This used to be two rooms," said David Shrair, the firm's managing partner and one of a group of investors who put \$3 million into an extensive renovation of the Haynes in the mid '80s, as he

gestured to his office. "The old hotel rooms were like cells, each one of them different; it's a great old building with a lot of history."

While Shrair waxed poetically on the glory years of the Haynes, he quickly moved on to another time in Springfield's history — the height of the real estate boom

lawyers, one of whom doesn't have a local phone number. Rona Fingold is not new to Cooley Shrair — she worked there for several years as a tax partner — but her working arrangement is. She relocated to Florida recently, and, at Shrair's urging, is now of-counsel for the firm, working in a remote fashion and making full

Shrair says he wouldn't classify the firm's current strategic plan as a "re-invention" of the company.

Rather, it's merely the continuation of an evolutionary process that began in 1946, he said, when Sidney Cooley, a musician-turned lawyer who was recently back from fighting in Europe during World War II, joined his brother Ed, already an accomplished business lawyer, in a venture called Cooley & Cooley.

The firm would eventually add future Massachusetts Gov. Foster Furcolo, said Shrair, who would become another addition in 1960. With business law and real estate as its primary areas of focus — but also a full range of specialties — the firm continued to grow through the '70s and '80s.

The end of the real estate boom and the collapse of the local banking sector hit all area law firms hard, said Shrair, including the one that by now had his name on the door. He told BusinessWest that the demise of Bank of New England prompted the firm to shed six lawyers, and that, by the time the dust eventually cleared, Cooley Shrair was about one-third the size it had been at its zenith.

Moving on from those tumultuous times has been a process of effectively leveraging Cooley Shrair's strong reputation in the business and legal communities, said Shrair, and maximizing opportunities in several practice areas.

The firm continues to thrive in the banking and business realm, he said, adding that his son, Peter, a partner, heads those efforts. Meanwhile, other strong suits include litigation, tax law, mergers and acquisitions, estate plan-

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in the go-go '80s. Banks were writing loans, and law firms that specialized in real estate and other financial matters, as Cooley Shrair did, were thriving.

"We had 21 lawyers then," said Shrair, noting that the number went down quickly and profoundly (the current total is nine) when the boom went bust as the decade drew to a close, and banks failed or merged with out-of-town or out-of-state institutions.

"All law firms suffered in those days, including ours, and some of them aren't here anymore," he told BusinessWest, listing some of the casualties. "But we moved on and made adjustments; we've adapted."

That process is ongoing, said Shrair, noting that as the firm celebrates its 60th birthday this year, it continues to make adjustments — to changing client needs, business conditions, and even technology, as the hands-free listening device permanently attached to Shrair's left ear would attest.

The firm recently added three

use of modern telecommunications technology.

"With the Internet, it's like she's in the office next door," said Shrair, adding that Fingold and the firm experimented with their long-distance arrangement before making her appointment official. "We tested it, and it worked fine."

Other recent additions — Maureen C. Tobin has joined the firm in the Estate Planning and Tax Department, and Diana I. Sorrentini-Velez has joined the firm in the Domestic and Civil Litigation Department — have been undertaken to give the firm additional depth and flexibility, said Shrair.

He told BusinessWest that the company is slowly but surely working its way back to something that may approach its size back in the late '80s. The main strategy for getting there is fairly simple, he said, listing customer service and what he called a "24/7 approach" to providing legal services.

Firm Resolve

ning, employment law, and others.

The broad goal is to be diverse, he explained, and to be able to provide a depth of services to individual clients.

Methods for achieving that goal and continued growth of the company will be the subjects of an ongoing strategic planning process, he explained, adding that such plans are common for larger firms in bigger metropolitan areas, but less so for company's Cooley Shrair's size.

One was deemed necessary, he said, to help the firm identify specific goals and focus continually on cultivating and honing a game plan for meeting them.

"We're still in the early stages of that process," he told BusinessWest, adding that a consulting firm has been retained and initial meetings have been held, with more scheduled for the this fall. "But this is a critically important step for us.

"We need to get everyone walking the same walk," he continued. "And to do that, we need to get everyone — the professionals and the support staff alike — to be part of the process."

Taxing Situation

The strategic planning efforts will include consideration of possible expansion efforts, said Shrair, noting that the firm currently has a second office in Northampton, and is mulling other area communities. Meanwhile, it will also address staffing issues and possible additions to help the firm better serve clients and generate new business opportunities.



Maureen C. Tobin, left, and Diana I. Sorrentini-Velez, recent additions to Cooley Shrair

The firm has already been busy on the hiring front, bringing on the three new attorneys — two of whom will be additions, while the third, Tobin, is filling a vacancy.

Tobin and Fingold will work together — but in different area codes — to fill the various business and tax-planning needs of individuals and corporations.

Fingold was a partner with Cooley Shrair for 15 years before relocating with her husband to Illinois, and subsequently to Florida, said Shrair, and has recently been practicing tax law for a national accounting firm on a remote basis; the firm has no physical presence there.

"I suggested to her that she could continue to do the things she used to do for us, and in the exact same fashion as she was doing them for the accounting firm," said Shrair, adding that Fingold 're-joined' the firm this

spring. "The Internet enables us to do that, and it's a good example of how the practice of law has changed."

Tobin was already quite familiar with the Cooley Shrair when the discussions about her joining the firm ensued — she was sharing space in the same building that the firm had chosen for its Northampton office. She was leasing a small office for her own venture, a private practice she established after working in the corporate sector in the financial services and estate planning realm, and finding it wasn't for her.

She told BusinessWest she came to Cooley Shrair because the firm's need for a tax/estate planning specialist gave her the opportunity to concentrate in the field, while also gaining access to the resources — in the form of other experienced lawyers — in that office.

Sorrentini-Velez was working in a small law firm in Westfield, and developing a solid reputation in divorce and other aspects of domestic law, when she was offered an opportunity to join Cooley Shrair and complement its chief litigator, Mark Mason. He was on the "other side of the aisle," as she put it, in several cases she was handling, and she came to appreciate how he and his associates at the firm worked.

Like Tobin, Sorrentini-Velez said she joined the firm because doing so represented a chance to take her practice to the next level, and also utilize the vast resources in the office, including each other.

"Having someone like Maureen as a resource is a huge," said Sorrentini-Velez. "If I have a question that I can't answer, I can just take a walk down the hall."

Case Closed

That would be one of the hallways of the old Haynes Hotel that help give this law firm a sense of place in the recent history of the city.

The old photographs, brick walls, and remnants of a grand staircase that wound its way up the hotel reflect another time, but also provide a sense of permanence.

The same can be said of the law firm, which has changed with the times and continues to thrive due to its ability to adopt to new business trends and ways to serve the client.

The device attached to David Shrair's ear tells the story. ♦

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