

HOWARD FELDMAN

Solving Problems One Person at a Time

by **Bethany Krajelis**

SPRINGFIELD—For Howard W. Feldman, there's no secret to practicing law.

It's about understanding the law and dealing with people to solve a problem, says Feldman, the founding partner of **Feldman, Wasser, Draper & Cox** in Springfield.

But Feldman's colleagues say this construction lawyer must have a couple of tricks up his sleeve, because when it comes to dealing with people, he has a magical touch.

Feldman's law partner, Stanley N. Wasser, says Feldman "can look at a case and look at people and be able to read the leaves of the case, as I always say."

Wasser believes that Feldman's caring ways allow him to connect with people in such a

63, says he picked up as a young man from his father, who ran a large retail appliance store.

After Feldman would finish his day as a teacher during the 1960s in Chicago, he would go work with his dad until the store closed at 9 each night.

"He worked really hard and was a very smart dude, no other way to put it," Feldman says. "He taught me the ability to understand people of different backgrounds and how to be able to judge what they're thinking."

Feldman, whose practice focuses on construction and family law as well as civil rights and employment law, picked up a few things about work ethic from his father. Feldman may smile when he refers to a 50-

career with the state. Looking for some help, Feldman called Wasser, who he knew professionally and as a fellow member of Springfield's Jewish community.

The two men's careers had crossed paths over the years with Wasser serving the Illinois Department of Transportation as general counsel and Feldman first working as an assistant attorney general and then as general counsel to the Capital Development Board.

Recalling how their law partnership formed, Wasser says that, "Howard called me one day and said, 'You don't want a paycheck every two weeks do you?'"

It wasn't long after that phone conversation that Wasser told his wife he was quitting his stable, state job and was going to cash in his pension to buy a desk and chair to go work with Feldman, who at the time, had a wife, Beryl, and three young children of his own at home.

Their law firm, which handles almost everything but workers' compensation cases, opened in January 1987. By the end of that year, two more attorneys joined Feldman and Wasser's firm, which now consists of eight attorneys.

Sure, it was risky, but for Wasser, "It was an easy decision because of Howard."

"He's a great attorney. He's smart and you can trust him," Wasser says. "And if you get to know him, you'll realize he will go out of his way to help you."

Feldman's law partner says he brings that same loyalty to his work as well.

"It may be a difficult case, but if someone really got wronged, Howard will say taking the case is the right thing to do even if we may lose," Wasser says, stressing Feldman's work on civil rights matters, including a successful challenge against the Sangamon County sheriff.



way that he truly understands them.

"Despite Howard's gruff exterior at times, he really does have a golden heart," Wasser says. "He has a great sense for people and that's just one of the reasons why he is such an excellent person to have as a partner."

Building a Law Firm

The ability to read people is a skill Feldman,

hour-work week as a reduced schedule, but he's not joking.

"Anybody who thinks they are going to be successful working a 40-hour week had best work for somebody else and not in the private sector," he says.

Feldman started his firm in 1987 after becoming busier than he expected at his five-year-old solo practice that followed a legal

Taking a Detour

Feldman was born in 1946 in Chicago, the son of a business owner and a homemaker who later became a county assessor.

In 1964, Feldman moved to West Lafayette, Ind. to study economics at Purdue University. It was there that Feldman got involved in politics with international student programming and student government affairs. He eventually worked on Robert F. Kennedy's campaign for presidency.

Unsure of what to do at a time when the Vietnam War was becoming hard to ignore, Feldman took the Law School Admission Test and the Graduate Record Examination to decide whether higher education was for him.

“I got a much better score on the LSAT than on the GRE,” Feldman recalls. “If it were the other way around, I’d probably be a professor at a college now teaching political science.”

With the war raging and the likelihood of getting drafted high in 1968, Feldman graduated and was admitted to Indiana University at Bloomington School of Law.

Assuming that he would not be able to finish law school without having to leave to serve in the military, Feldman left school after one summer of classes.

He enrolled in the Chicago Teacher Core, a program that required him to teach at inner-city schools in Chicago and resulted in a master’s degree in education.

“It was an eye-opening experience for somebody who perceived the ability to change the world,” Feldman recalls. “Working with very, very poor children, some of whom had huge handicaps, within the structure of the Chicago Public School system was a challenge.”

Almost two years into the program, Feldman joined the Army Reserve, which required six months of active duty and six years in a reserve component. After those six years, he was no longer subject to the draft and eligible to go back to law school full-time.

“That really was my goal all along.”

For Feldman, law school was a means to a political end. He never saw himself as a candidate but rather behind-the-scenes, involved in the area of policy.

Somewhere on his journey to and through law school, however, Feldman discovered the practice of law was actually pretty interesting.

Making a Name for Himself

Feldman graduated law school in 1973, during a period similar to now when the economy made it difficult for young lawyers to find jobs.

He applied for a job with the Illinois Attorney General’s office in Chicago and felt fortunate to get an interview and job offer for a position even though it was located in its Springfield office.

Feldman started his career in the attorney general’s office in 1973, defending the state in the Court of Claims Division. He says he got his first lesson in construction law from a case the division was handling that dealt with claims arising out of the remodeling of the state Capitol in the late 1960s and early 70s.

Eventually, Feldman moved to the General Law Division. He stayed there until 1978, when

he left to take a job as general counsel to the state’s Capital Development Board, which is in charge of all the state’s construction projects.

At the request of the governor’s office and the state board, the attorney general’s office designated Feldman a special assistant attorney general. In that role, Feldman helped the state and board enforce their contractual rights against bad construction, something he says had not been done up until that point.

The board was also busy with the construction of two major state buildings, one in Chicago and one in Springfield. During the early 1980s, there was between \$500 and \$700 million a year flowing through that agency, Feldman says.

Deciding that he was a better litigator than bureaucrat, Feldman took the risk and went into private practice. He rented an office in the suite that his law firm continues to operate out of today.

Fred Hahn, the Capital Development Board’s current general counsel, never worked with Feldman at the board but has dealt with him over the years in multi-party construction cases.

“He’s an excellent advocate and he recognizes there are ways to resolve things,” Hahn says.

“Sometimes, I am involved with attorneys who want to stretch a matter out forever, make discovery go on and on. Not to say he doesn’t do what needs to be done, but he can cut to the chase on an issue and get it resolved.”

If Feldman is representing a client in a case that also involves the state, Hahn knows “it’s not going to be a war” but rather a cooperative situation where everyone is working to resolve the issue.

Besides earning a solid reputation within the legal community, including a six-year stint on the Illinois State Bar Association’s Board of Governors, Feldman, a grandfather of two, has also made a name for himself within the local community.

Factor in his lifelong hobby, and there’s a chance that Feldman’s name—or at least his radio call sign—is even recognized worldwide.

“I’ve been a HAM radio operator for 50 years,” Feldman says. “I’m using the same amateur radio call sign that I got when I was thirteen years old.” ■