

STEVE HANNA

Using Science to Serve the Law, Clients

by Elizabeth Davies

MOLINE—When Steve Hanna takes on a new criminal case, he approaches it with the scientific intensity of a “CSI” expert.

First, he looks for holes in the evidence. Then, he dissects the DNA. From seminars and conferences, Hanna has learned that DNA evidence isn’t as rock-solid as the general public might think. In fact, evidence that prosecutors consider a boon might well become the evidence that sets his client free.

“As a criminal defense lawyer, you need to look at things and really study them,” he says. “I like to see the government and police being held to the standards they should be. I’m not trying to get guilty people off. I’m just trying to keep innocent people from being convicted.”

It’s that determination to seek the truth inside the evidence that has helped Hanna’s Moline-based practice, **Hanna and Ruud LLC**, flourish. The practice recently moved to new offices in the heart of downtown Moline, blocks from both the police station and courthouse.

He and partner Jonathon Ruud, another Quad Cities native, take on defense work in traffic, drug, sex, embezzlement, and DUI cases. It’s a place where Hanna can maintain relationships with the investigators and prosecutors he works with every day.

“Our goal is to be professional and diplomatic,” Hanna says. “We’re all just doing our jobs. It’s a good working environment for everybody.”

And being an area native helps strengthen those relationships.

“I know a lot of people and I’ve been here a long time,” he says.

A Late Starter in the Law

When he graduated from United Township High School in 1972, the thought of a legal career was the last thing on Hanna’s mind.

The East Moline native simply did what many of his classmates did. He headed over to one of the major factories in town to fill out an application. He spent time doing construction work at both International Harvester and John Deere. The pay was very good, especially for a kid right out of high school. The job came with benefits, security, and rewards for longtime employees. But it wasn’t for Hanna.



“I didn’t like the factory work at all,” he said. “It paid fairly well. I just really didn’t like the repetitive work.”

For a while, Hanna put in his time at the factories, tucking aside cash and using it to buy and fix up homes throughout his community. But when the housing market turned sour, Hanna decided to go back to school at the age of 28.

“I knew I wanted an education and to make money,” he said.

He took classes at Black Hawk College until he had an associate’s degree and earned his bachelor’s degree in 1986 from St. Ambrose University 14 years after graduating from high school.

The job prospects for someone with his business degree were poor, though, and Hanna

soon found himself pondering advice he was given by a local lawyer. Hanna had met Ray McLaughlin while doing renovation work on the lawyer’s home, and remembered his suggestion that Hanna attend law school.

“When I was working on houses, doing construction, and remodeling, I worked for a lot of lawyers,” Hanna said. “They had nice houses.”

In fact, Hanna took the advice so personally that he chose to attend law school at McLaughlin’s alma mater, Saint Louis University School of Law. He also spent a year at the University of Iowa’s College of Law as a visiting student. In time, he completed his classes. At the age of 34, he drove to Des Moines to take the bar exam.

“Within 30 days of graduating, I took the bar and was a licensed attorney,” Hanna says.

Later that year, he became licensed in Illinois and in federal court.

He went to work for a mid-sized firm, doing insurance defense work in Moline. It was an unhappy five years, Hanna says, and he was glad to move out on his own in 1995.

"I was in general practice and I would take just about anything within reason," he says. "Then I started realizing criminal work was more lucrative and there was a need for it."

Early into his career in criminal law, Hanna realized a passion for helping the accused.

'We Have DNA' Means Nothing

"They must be proven guilty beyond a reasonable doubt," he says. "I don't know if they're innocent, but I do try to look at my clients in the most favorable light."

That's why he scrutinizes evidence and testing procedure. He doesn't want to see an innocent man wrongly convicted.

"There's a lot of room for error (in police testing)," he says. "I'm going to make them prove everything. I enjoy cross-examining in my search for the truth."

"There sure are a lot of wrongful convictions. You see it in the newspapers all the time. The government has a lot of power and resources, and some prosecutors lose sight of their role in the justice machine. We shouldn't go down there and have to prove our clients innocent, though we have."

Hanna describes a case where he poked enough holes in the prosecution's DNA evidence that he ended up winning the case.

"Just because they say, 'We have DNA', it doesn't mean anything," he says. "That DNA turned out to be my best evidence. They said, 'Your client might as well plead; he doesn't stand a chance.' It was the complete opposite."

In court, Hanna cross-examined a state witness to show that several components of the DNA were missing. Had they been present, his client could have been exonerated. That was more than enough reasonable doubt to win the case.

"When you can take their expert and make them your witness, there's nothing better than that."

Hanna learned much about DNA and other scientific evidence through organizations such as the National College for DUI Defense and the National Association of Criminal Defense Lawyers.

"I joined those in 2007 and because of that, it has changed my practice," he says. "I have a fundamental comprehension of forensic evidence. If you don't like science and forensics, you better not be a criminal lawyer."

It was at a professional seminar that Hanna met DUI defense expert Donald Ramsell, a

Wheaton attorney who has been practicing in his field for the past 27 years.

"I was telling attendees there was a way to practice this area of law that was cutting edge and could grow their practice in leaps and bounds," Ramsell says. "I said if anyone was interested, they should contact me. (Hanna) was one of maybe three people who have ever done that."

Over time, Ramsell says, Hanna has used scientific knowledge to become one of the state's best DUI defense attorneys.

"Not only does he learn the science behind police forensics, he researches police investigation techniques," he says. "He goes the extra step when others didn't even know there was another step to take."

Arizona-based attorney James Nesci has known Hanna for more than 10 years, having met him through the 1,200-member National College of DUI Defense. He has been impressed with Hanna's research skills and intelligence.

"He's one of the smarter people I know and he really cares about his clients," he says. "He cares about hard work and he does hard work."

Hanna is quick to help other lawyers in their organization solve problems, and has much to contribute to the College, Nesci says.

"He's a good strategist," Nesci says. "He can diagnose the problem with a case pretty quickly. And, he's a realist, too. He can look at it and diagnose the problem and the best course of action. He lays out a pretty rational course of action. That skill is underrated among many lawyers."

Hanna says good criminal defense lawyers hold a handful of similar characteristics. They must be detail-oriented, have a solid scientific background, and get along with other people. The last, he says, is a skill needed for successful negotiations.

Prosecutors "have a lot of cases and they can't possibly try them all," he says. "We would like to negotiate for them to not try ours."

It's also important to have a good relationship with clients, to make sure that everyone shares the same expectations heading into a case.

"If we're not on the same page, it's a recipe for failure," he says.

Influence in Life-Changing Moments

Hanna is active in Moline's New Hope Church and keeps a stack of church business cards on his desk, offering them to clients in an effort to go beyond their legal needs. Hanna says many clients and their families have accepted his invitation to church or are prompted to return to their own church. Some now attend his church on a regular basis.

"A lot of the people who come to me are at a point in their lives where they want to make a

change," he said. "It takes time and effort to change. Many people express the desire, but don't follow through. Others follow through and are successful in making lifestyle changes that lead them away from the destructive behaviors that brought them into the justice system."

In court, Hanna says his practice has a different approach to choosing and educating jurors, something he says makes his firm stand out from others and helps them win cases.

"I'm going to spend a lot more time on jury selection," he says. "If I can get the jurors to commit to being fair and explain to them about clear and convincing evidence, it helps us win in court."

It's precisely that approach—educating jurors and arming himself with information—that makes Hanna stand out among his peers, says Justin McShane, a Pennsylvania-based defense attorney and nationally known forensic science expert.

McShane says Hanna has an exceptional ability to communicate with judges and juries. "He makes information empowering to others, so they can make their own decisions," he says.

The two attorneys met through some of the courses that McShane teaches and McShane has been impressed with Hanna.

Lawyers "come in two different types; the show ponies and the people who know what they're doing to litigate well," McShane said. "He has great knowledge and puts it into place. He has a quest for knowledge and information, but also can apply it."

And Hanna's blue-collar background perhaps gives him a personable quality.

"If he was just walking around, you wouldn't know he is a lawyer," McShane said. "He's just the kind of guy who could be your next-door neighbor. He's a regular guy, but also a very good lawyer."

When he's not dissecting forensics or cross-examining witnesses, the 58-year-old lawyer enjoys his Harley Davidson collection and Corvette.

Along with his wife, Karen, a retired second-grade teacher, he enjoys spending time with their four young grandsons. Building on the days before the law became his career, he also enjoys buying and remodeling homes with his son.

Professionally, Hanna sees plenty of success moving forward.

"We are going to just keep going like we are, learning more science, maybe adding another lawyer or two," he says. "It's been a good career for me and I think it's going to go on for a few more years here. It seems like I just got going good. I want to keep on going." ■