

The Sarnoffs

From McDonald's and the NFL to Real Estate Law

by Paul Dailing

James B. "Jimmy" Sarnoff knew he had made the right choice when he was at a Chicago White Sox game, he recalls.

He had spent the previous few years split between two careers. He worked as a sports agent with his brother Ken, recruiting and representing the NFL's finest, and he also practiced real estate law with his father Robert M. "Bob" Sarnoff at **Sarnoff & Baccash**.

Jimmy had recently quit the agency to focus full-time on law. At that White Sox game with both his father and brother, he was able to relax and enjoy the game in a way he hadn't in years.

He wasn't the only one who found the game memorable.

"My father turned to us and said, 'This is the most enjoyable game I've had with you guys in years,'" Jimmy Sarnoff recalls.

Father and son team Bob and Jimmy Sarnoff are the go-to pair for Chicago-area property owners who feel they've been given unfair tax assessments. Since Jimmy's return, the established firm has been growing to tackle the changing market and changing client needs. The firm that started in the 1980s with two partners and a secretary now has a staff of 20, eight of whom are lawyers.

Harry Seigle, principal of the family-owned and operated property management company Elgin Co., met the Sarnoffs socially at a charitable event about eight years ago.

Today, Sarnoff & Baccash represents Elgin in connection with commercial properties in northeastern Illinois, specifically in contesting real estate taxation they deem inappropriate.

Seigle says he continues to work with the firm for three main reasons.

"One, they're highly responsive. Inquiries get answered always on the same day or within a 24-hour period. Two, there's really professional precision in their work. Three, they're good advisers. They tell you when you have a good case to make, and they'll drop you a confidential note when you do not. They don't waste their time or their clients' time," Seigle says. "Their integrity is 100 percent."

He also praises the diligence of Sarnoffs, who personally review every assessment their experts bring in, rather than just forwarding the valuation to the developer.



“They never take shortcuts,” Seigle says. “They don’t cut corners.”

Matt Goode, principal with Venture One Real Estate, agrees.

“They’re realistic. They’re honest. They don’t overpromise. They don’t underpromise. And that’s very important to us and our business,” he says.

Sarnoff & Baccash work on about half of Venture One’s portfolio, Goode says, and have “always done fantastic work.” In the case of one Bloomingdale industrial building, the firm was able to bring the tax valuation from about \$500,000 to \$100,000, Goode says.

But there’s a bigger reason Goode’s group continues to work with the Sarnoffs. “We trust them,” he says.

Food, Folks and Fun

Bob Sarnoff, 72, was born in Chicago, but spent several years in San Diego before returning to the region when he was 11.

His father was in the restaurant business, owning a number of DeMars restaurants, a drive-in and a Copper Top restaurant.

“I had an interest, I thought, in medicine, but soon decided I didn’t like dealing with cadavers,” Bob Sarnoff says.

He thought he wanted to be in finance, but after visiting brokerage firms he decided more education would be helpful. He went to the Illinois Institute of Technology Chicago-Kent College of Law, graduating in 1968.

After a few months at American National Bank, the elder Sarnoff decided he didn’t want to be a banker. He accepted an offer to join the real estate department of a growing corporation in its then-offices at 221 N. LaSalle.

It was McDonald’s. Bob Sarnoff’s office was a few feet away from Ray Kroc’s.

In the late 1960s, everyone who worked for the fast-food chain, even the lawyers, had to work two weeks at Hamburger University, the company’s training program for restaurant managers.

“Kroc’s idea was that you really couldn’t represent the company well unless you really knew all facets of the company,” Bob Sarnoff says.

It once almost backfired.

“I was negotiating a deal with an attorney in California and he did not know who I was or how old I was or anything about me, but he happened to be visiting McDonald’s one day in the Hamburger University,” Sarnoff recalls. “He walked in

and I was introduced to him. I was wearing a white cap and an outfit and so forth. He didn’t treat me very well after that, after he thought I was working a grill.”

The company at the time was a place where burger flippers and executives not only were treated the same, but could be the same people.

“People who were sweeping floors turned out to be president and chairmen of the company,” Sarnoff says. “It was a fun place to work.”

In May 1970, Sarnoff married his wife Jane, whom he had only been dating for three or four months. They knew it was right.

What wasn’t right was staying with McDonald’s.

When McDonald’s moved from Chicago to Oak Brook in 1971, Sarnoff decided not to go with them. He joined the Cook County State’s Attorney Office. Since he had real estate experience through the fast-food chain, he was put in charge of real estate property tax, defending the Cook County Assessor’s Office.

“Kroc’s idea was that you really couldn’t represent the company well unless you really knew all facets of the company.”

He was there for two years before joining a large law firm, but during that relatively short time he met fellow assistant state’s attorney and future law partner Michael Baccash.

After two years, Sarnoff left to join Arvey, Hodes, Costello and Burman in 1973, where he spent 13 years. He was recruited after impressing one of their lawyers while fighting them in court.

He did well, becoming the firm’s youngest partner after two years working there, but decided big firm life wasn’t for him.

“When you’re with a large firm, things are divided up a lot as to how they handled matters,” he says. “I was in charge of court litigation, but I really wanted to be handling a client from the beginning, from the assessor, then to the board of review level, then to court.”

Sarnoff and Baccash became Sarnoff & Baccash in 1986.

“It was just he and I, and actually we had a secretary, and that was it,” Sarnoff says.

Real Estate / Agent

Jimmy Sarnoff, 38, grew up in Glencoe, going to Bears, Bulls, Hawks and both Cubs and Sox games with his father and older brother Ken.

“Sports is a very big part of our relationship for all three of us. It’s almost an outlet for us in terms of going to games and spending time together. That’s really what we do. Some father and sons go shooting, some father and sons go fishing, some father and sons do other things. We go to sports games,” Jimmy Sarnoff says.

Ken became a sports agent. While Jimmy was in law school at IIT-Chicago Kent, he started doing brochures for athletes his brother was going after.

At Kent’s yearly pre-finals “Convixer Bash,” Jimmy spotted a woman he was too nervous to talk to. He could help his brother buttonhole hot commodity linebackers, but there was something about his future wife that intimidated him.

Luckily, he ran into her again after finals.

On their first date, Leslie mentioned she was in the process of getting her master’s degree from Northwestern University in biotechnology, a term Jimmy had never heard before.

“I ran into the bathroom and I called my best friend, who was in dental school at the time, and I said, ‘Tell me everything you can about biotechnology right now,’” Jimmy Sarnoff says.

The ruse worked. She was impressed (and he fessed up years ago, so this article reveals no relationship secrets).

After law school, Jimmy started at the bottom rung of Sarnoff & Baccash to get some experience with real estate law. Shortly after, he partnered with his brother and got registered as an NFL agent. He started splitting his time between traveling the country recruiting players and handling real estate work back in Chicago.

He has fond memories, but realized it couldn’t last.

“My moment with that was probably at a football game in Louisville when I was recruiting a running back and I looked and I saw two other agents there,” he says.

They were two of the top agents in the nation, both in their 50s or 60s.

“I’m looking at both these guys and they’re working as hard as I am, and I was in my 20s at the time,” he says.

He and his wife had just had their first child, Alexis, now 7. The new father decided a life of weekends spent watching

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practices at muddy fields in far-flung colleges was not the life he wanted. He rejoined his father full-time at the firm, but now with greater confidence in his abilities to reach out to new clients.

“If I could go up to a first draft pick in the NFL draft and introduce myself, I could certainly talk to somebody’s who’s a normal guy who owns real estate in Chicago,” Jimmy Sarnoff says.

Bob Sarnoff says he was “thrilled” when his youngest returned to the firm full-time. Not only did he get more time with his offspring, but the agency experience had given the firm a keen negotiator.

“I think he learned a lot about negotiation and about dealing with people,” Bob Sarnoff says. “It’s been invaluable as he’s grown here and assumed a leadership position. We mentor each other on different aspects. I’ve learned quite a bit from him.”

Father and Son at Work

Josh Herz, president Associated Agencies Inc., met Jimmy through the Standard Club and then the Jewish Federation about 10 years ago. He has worked with the firm several times since then.

Herz, who works with many family

businesses and is part of one himself, says the Sarnoffs work together, listen to each other and bounce ideas off each other in a way rare for a father and son.

“I’ve been to their office several times. Just to see them working together, brainstorming on strategies to help their clients in a creative and really loving way, it’s exciting to see,” Herz says.

The secret is mutual respect and the realization of what each person brings to the table.

“Not many people can work with their father. I’m very blessed and lucky to have a fantastic father who has always spent the time mentoring me,” Jimmy Sarnoff says.

“Sometimes I feel I’m the one looking up because he comes up with so many more different ideas,” says Bob. “The benefit of youth is the ideas.”

About 10 years ago, Bob Sarnoff co-founded the National Association of Property Tax Attorneys, where he’s the Illinois representative. Jimmy serves as secretary for the group.

In part, the group exists to help clients. Clients often own properties in several states, so having a referral source can be valuable.

But the association also helps its members

build their own expertise, providing daily updates on changing case law across the nation, online resources for reaching out with questions and seminars and speakers so members can be kept abreast of developments in the field.

The Sarnoffs also both keep active in their community.

Jimmy is involved with the Francis W. Parker School his two oldest children attend and is a past president of the Young Leadership Division for the Jewish United Fund of Metropolitan Chicago. In the 18-month position, he oversaw a \$3.2 million campaign for Chicago’s largest 501(c)3. He was the 2014 recipient of the Davis, Gidwitz and Glasser Young Leadership Award.

Bob was on the board of the Anti-Defamation League of Chicago. Currently, he sits on the advisory board for IIT-Chicago Kent, the school where both he and his sons studied to become practitioners of the law. He has written the Illinois chapter for the American Bar Association’s Property Tax Deskbook for the last 20 years.

“We’ve always tried to reach out, as best we can, to do other things,” Bob Sarnoff says. ■