LANSING — Perhaps auto no-fault expert George T. Sinas of the Sinas Dramis Law Firm was born into the profession. Even if that’s true, he has certainly made his own way ever since.

Sinas, 66, was born in Detroit just two weeks before his father, Thomas G. Sinas, wrapped up law school at the University of Detroit. After Thomas completed school, the family moved to Lansing where he started a solo practice in 1951.

Little did he know at the time that it would flourish into the firm known well for its reputation in Michigan today, 66 years later.

One year after the firm began, college classmate Lee C. Dramis joined. In addition to their education, the two shared the common trait of having suffered health problems. Sinas had severe heart damage from a serious case of rheumatic fever as an infant. Dramis, a World War II veteran, sustained a serious facial wound while fighting in the Battle of Guadalcanal.

These experiences were part of what drew them to personal injury work. Dramis began establishing a PI practice, which was far less common in the 1950s.

“There was one common thing that they had, and that was they both had a real empathy for people who were disabled, poor and disadvantaged — Lee because of his terrible war wound and my dad because of his cardiac problems,” Sinas says.

The junior Sinas joined the firm in 1975 after it had grown under his father and Dramis’ leadership. That year, Dramis was the president of the Michigan Trial Lawyers Association.

Sinas and his father had a strong working relationship, but that didn’t change the fact that being the firm founder’s son elevated his level of stress.

“It was very challenging,” Sinas says about joining a firm where his dad worked. “When you go to court for the first time, you know…that everybody in the courtroom is thinking the same thing. Is this kid here because he knows something or is he here because his dad runs the office? So, you have to really make sure you’re prepared and you have to really demonstrate you are here in your own right, not because you’ve got the right last name. So, there was extra pressure outside the office.”

Sinas’ father was there to provide plenty of wisdom, but Sinas says he was primarily mentored by Dramis, whose line of work fascinated the young Sinas.
“As a kid growing up, I really kind of thought of Lee as a hero. He was just the nicest, kindest, most compassionate guy, and I just always admired him, and I admired the work he did, and I wanted to do what Dramis did,” he says. It’s safe to say he’s achieved that aspiration — and then some.

Sinas joined the firm at the perfect time to focus on becoming an expert on the state’s auto no-fault law passed in 1973. “Lee was kind of a visionary. He was aware that Michigan had just passed this huge auto no-fault law, and he knew it was going to change the law. The law had passed only 18 months before I became a lawyer, and there were no appellate decisions. He insisted that I learn as much as I could about this statute, that I read all the cases as they came down, that I summarize the cases, that I write articles. I trusted the guy, and that’s what he wanted me to do, and so that’s what I did,” Sinas says.

As Sinas began to immerse himself in studying auto no-fault law at the recommendation of Dramis, tragedy struck the firm, twice. First, Dramis died in 1981 after battling brain cancer. Four years later, Thomas Sinas died from his lifelong heart complications.

While the firm was in solid standing — it had been around for more than 30 years by the time of its founder’s passing — it still left doubts among others in the legal community as to its future.

“The prognostication was: They’re not going to last. You lose the two top partners like that,” Sinas says. “But Tim and I and all the older partners were able to keep it together, and we started to grow.”

Tim is Timothy J. Donovan, who started at the firm the same year George Sinas did. He retired last year after 41 years with the firm, where he remains of counsel.

Donovan credits Sinas and his father for creating an environment that’s helped the firm to continue strongly as it passed to the next generation and is set up for a third one. George Sinas’ two sons, Stephen H. Sinas and Thomas G. Sinas, are partners with the firm today.

The three Sinas men are joined by three other partners, Mike Larkin, Jim Graves and Bryan Waldman, who Sinas says are phenomenal lawyers who have been indispensable to making the firm what it is today.

Moreover, each of those partners is the son of a father who was a highly respected lawyer. In expressing his high regard for his other partners and their impressive pedigrees, Sinas says, “I like to think of our law firm as ‘the legacy lawyers’ because all of us, in our own way, perpetuate the
legacies of the outstanding lawyers who made us who we are.”

Donovan likewise says working in a firm of legacy lawyers has made it a special place to work.

“It was a tremendous privilege to have known Tom Sinas…and to see the interaction between him and his son George. It really helped to foster and create what I think George carried on with the firm, which was the strong sense of family and the commitment to the family of our other attorneys and our support staff, so much so that we’ve had numerous of support staff who’ve been with us for over 20 years. I credit Tom and subsequently his son George as creating that atmosphere within our firm,” Donovan says.

“They had a great relationship, and it really is heartening to me as a person watching that relationship, and then seeing George continue that relationship with his two sons who are now partners with the firm. It really was a thing of beauty to watch,” he says.

That wisdom Sinas gleaned from his relationship with his father has clearly had a profound effect on him. Many professionals who know him in the legal community describe Sinas as a highly regarded, zealous advocate.

Writing the Book

When the auto no-fault statute went into effect, Sinas says it was a game-changer for the Michigan legal world.

“We went from a tort liability system to a system that was new to a very large extent a no-fault system with a significant amount of tort liability remaining but definitely a kind of tort liability that was substantially changed,” he says. “So, it was a whole new legal system.”

“Just imagine that the world has been revolving around the common law of negligence and all the sudden there’s a statutory change, and no one has ever studied it in law school, nobody has ever worked within a system like that.

“So, when you are afforded the opportunity I had, which was basically to come in on the ground floor of a whole body of jurisprudence, that creates a lot of opportunity for you and the firm within which you work, and that was the table Dramis had set for me. This was the ground floor. Not a single appellate decision had been made by the time I passed the bar. This was the ground for the NFRBO set for me. This was the ground for the NFRBO.”

And he teaches every day. You’re just around the guy, and you’re just amazed at the breadth and depth of knowledge,” Constand says. “I’ve seen George speaking to his constituency groups, and when he talks, people listen. He’s got a way of explaining himself that is very much in layman’s terms and cuts right to the core of the issues.”

A part of that depth of knowledge can literally be studied in the book on auto no-fault law he’s maintained for nearly 40 years.

Sinas is the creator of the No-Fault Red Book, co-written with Donovan and first published in 1978. It was supplemented frequently and became an indispensable research tool for lawyers practicing in the auto accident field. Several years ago, the No-Fault Red Book was converted to an online product known as the “No-Fault Red Book Online” (NFRBO), which is now managed by Sinas’ son, Steve. Sinas hopes the NFRBO will become even more successful than the original Red Book.

Sinas was also a key player in establishing the Coalition Protecting Auto No-Fault (CPAN) in 2003, a group of about 1,000 organizations and individuals with a variety of interests, ranging from medical providers to consumer groups and citizens. All have a stake in Michigan’s auto no-fault insurance system.

He describes the group as a “real exercise in divergent groups setting aside their political and philosophical differences and finding common ground to rally around and work together to achieve their mutual interests.”

“We’ve demonstrated that coalitions can work. You don’t have to agree on everything,” he says. “The secret to the whole thing is you’ve got to find what unites you.”

The group’s impact, Sinas says, has been significant in keeping Michigan one of only 13 states that have auto no-fault laws.

“It is maybe the biggest reason why this system has largely remained intact in the face of almost two decades of incessant insurance industry lobbying to dramatically alter the system we all think is well serving our citizens,” he says. “The principles involved in these cases are very significant because they really cut to the core of access to medical care…Those matters I think have a societal significance that transcends auto no-fault.”

Constand points out that Sinas’ position as a leader is helped by his personality.

“He’s just a real pleasure to be around, but when it’s time to get serious, you fall in line behind George, and when it’s time for somebody to lead you into battle, you walk to him and you hand him the sword…he’s one very, intelligent, knowledgeable and fierce competitor, not in a mean way, but just because he knows his facts and stands up for what’s right.

“He frames the conversations, he frames the arguments,” he says. “We absolutely depend on not just George but his sons, too…and his sons are every bit as principled and passionate as George is. That family is in it, they are on the front lines, and thank goodness they are.”

Presence in the Courtroom

Former Ingham County Circuit Judge James R. Giddings was a judge for 38 years before he retired in 2010. Across nearly four decades, he counts only a handful of other attorneys he looked forward to seeing in his courtroom as much as George Sinas.

“George has a presence. There are all kinds of lawyers…George, of course, in his legal ability is just outstanding, but he has a presence in the courtroom,” he says. “When he walks in there, people pay attention, and it’s as if they know he has something to say and that it will be important.”

Giddings attributes that presence to a couple of things, including that Sinas is “one of the most prepared lawyers” he’s ever encountered.

“There is no stone that is unturned in terms of his preparation for a trial or a case...
or a motion. He has an amazing attention to detail," he says. “Every last detail is thought out and considered and weighed, and so I think he comes to court with a confidence that he has all the weapons in his arsenal and can call on them when necessary.”

In addition to his thoroughness, Giddings cites Sinas’ “deep commitment to justice and fairness” for his work as another reason that’s led to him being “preeminent in his legal ability,” he says.

“There are a handful of lawyers, when they were coming into my court, I thought ‘what a great honor and privilege to have them come in,’ because I knew they were going to be good, I knew they knew what they were doing. They weren’t going to waste their case on some silly, frivolous lawsuit.

“I probably count in that number in 38 years, maybe seven, eight or nine lawyers that I put in that category, and George would be one of those. If they were coming to me, to my court, I looked forward to it because I knew it was going to be a great presentation.

“When they come to court, you just sit there and say, ‘Wow, this should be good.’ And it usually is,” he says. “There aren’t many of them that can fall in that category, and George is one of very few, in my opinion.”

The underlying and unwavering motive that drives Sinas’ passion for his work is the constant reminder he’s confronted with at work: gratitude. As a longtime advocate for injured individuals, Sinas always tries to consciously make himself aware that he’s fortunate.

“I told my sons a few years ago, ‘Here’s the one thing that’s most important about what I do, and that is the gratitude I feel every day when I get to go home and I’m still standing and I’m able to walk into the house and hug my wife and wake up in the morning and enjoy every day,’ and I compare that to what happened to every single one of my clients, who were experiencing life that was going just fine a minute ago and then everything became un-fine, and everything became a nightmare,” he says.

That gratitude also serves as a reminder to not let his clients down.

“The main thing is realizing every day that there’s a lot of people who have had awful things happen to them. You are their lifeboat, they depend on you, you can influence dramatically the quality of life they’ll have, and that’s the thing you always have to think about,” he says.

Sinas is also grateful for his family. He married his high school sweetheart, Sheryl, whom he met at Sexton High School in Lansing 50 years ago. In addition to their two sons and their wives, they have four grandchildren.