For nearly six decades, Gene Zafft has worked tirelessly with numerous clients, including multiple generations of the same family, on estate planning, tax issues, and creative strategies for growing their businesses. Among his most notable clients: Jimmy Hoffa.

Zafft recalls that he had recently joined Rosenblum Goldenhersh when its founder, the late Stanley Rosenblum, JD ’47, walked into Zafft’s office to discuss a high-profile potential client.

“We’re going to Detroit Friday,” Rosenblum said, seemingly out of the blue.

“What’s in Detroit?” Zafft recalls asking in surprise.

“We are going to meet with Jimmy Hoffa on a new tax case,” Rosenblum said. The Internal Revenue Service had challenged deductions on the tax return filed by the president of the International Brotherhood of Teamsters, more commonly known as the Teamsters Union.

“So we met with Jimmy Hoffa,” Zafft says, “and Stanley said to me, ‘Go meet with his accountant and get the documents so you can take over the case.’ It was quite a challenge for a 30-year-old lawyer. We ended up prevailing in the case and Hoffa said to me, ‘I want you to handle all my tax matters and make sure everything is properly reported.’”

Zafft represented Hoffa in personal, noncriminal matters, ranging from tax issues to business interests: “I had no involvement with Teamsters Union matters, but, from my vantage point, his dedication to the union rank and file seemed mutual and sincere.”

A Lifetime of Law

At 83, Gene Zafft Continues His Illustrious Legal Career

“I can’t really say there’s much I don’t like about being a lawyer,” says Gene Zafft, JD ’52, whose career spans 58 years—so far. He still happily works at his St. Louis firm, Rosenblum Goldenhersh, five days a week.

BY GARY LIBMAN
It turned out that Hoffa’s legal situation dictated that he and Zafft often met under unusual circumstances. “Just before he went to jail in 1967, he asked me to meet him in Washington, D.C., to review personal and financial matters,” Zafft recalls. He also visited Hoffa several times to discuss his tax returns and pending IRS issues at the Pennsylvania penitentiary where Hoffa was incarcerated for jury tampering and misusing union pension funds. Zafft emphasized that no criminal tax charges were ever brought against Hoffa. After President Richard Nixon pardoned Hoffa in 1971, Zafft continued to represent Hoffa and his family in their tax, financial, and investment matters. The two also traveled together on several business trips, and, on occasion, Zafft spent the night in Hoffa’s home.

Zafft worked for Hoffa periodically from 1961 until July 1975, when Hoffa, according to media accounts, vanished from the parking lot of a suburban Detroit restaurant and was never seen again. The sudden disappearance came as a shock to Zafft, who suffered the loss of a friend. Authorities received many reports about how he disappeared and where his body was hidden. Zafft speculates that Hoffa was killed and his body promptly disposed of in nearby Lake Orion north of Detroit.

Over the course of his legal career, Zafft has represented numerous clients in a full range of matters in taxation; estate planning; and corporate, financial, and real estate transactions. He relishes coming up with creative solutions to legal problems and demystifying issues for his clients. His book, 20 Questions to Ask About Wills and Estates, which he co-authored with his son, Robert Zafft, a Harvard 1990 law graduate, is a nationally recognized guide.

After he earned his JD in 1952, Zafft served in Korea as a captain in the Judge Advocate General Corps with the U.S. Army’s 25th Infantry Division. Following his military service, he was awarded a research fellowship by New York University School of Law, where he earned an LLM in taxation before joining Rosenblum Goldenhersh. He held the top ranking in his class and had his master’s thesis published in the NYU Tax Law Review.

Above all, Zafft says he owes his career to Washington University School of Law professors who taught him to think like a lawyer. “The main challenge of being a lawyer is analyzing difficult situations and finding practical solutions,” he says. “I had good professors who challenged us with hypothetical situations. They kept asking ‘What if?’ questions.”

Zafft used this Socratic method with his students while teaching for more than 45 years as an adjunct taxation professor at the law school. He also taught taxation at Washington University’s business school. A 2001 recipient of the law school’s Distinguished Alumni Award, Zafft is a believer in giving back. He currently serves on the Washington University Law National Council, and he and his wife, Marlene, have sponsored an annual Scholar in Law scholarship for several years.

After decades as a partner in his firm, he is now Of Counsel, with law remaining his true calling.

“The thing I like best,” Zafft says, “is having clients who appreciate the effort expended in solving their problems. I think the people I represent will say I bring something more to the table than legal skill. My wife frequently says that ‘Gene has left a piece of his kishkes [Yiddish for ‘guts’] on a lot of negotiating tables around the country.’ It is the serious dedication to our clients’ interests and achieving a desired solution that I find very challenging and rewarding.”