ENHANCING THE LAW SCHOOL’S SUCCESS

Endowed Visiting Professorship Reflects Couple’s Commitment to Diverse Perspectives
HEN YVONNE, JD ’88, AND JOE CORDELL, LLM ’08, decided to start their law firm in St. Louis in 1990, they took all kinds of cases. “We had to open the doors wide,” says Joe Cordell. “We had to do what our clients needed.” Over time, that turned out to be family law, today the exclusive purview of the domestic litigation firm of Cordell & Cordell.

“We wouldn’t have predicted this,” Joe Cordell says, “but it was clearly a sign of the many problems our society faces and the family values we deem important that are often undermined. It has become important to us to help preserve those values in political, cultural, and moral contexts.”

The Cordells have made a gift commitment of $1 million to establish and endow the Cordell & Cordell Visiting Professorship. The gift will support an established legal scholar and teacher who demonstrates a commitment to adding a diverse voice to legal education, including one that represents a conservative and/or Libertarian viewpoint. The Cordells hope the visiting professorship also will attract a strong scholar and teacher who is committed to public service, pro bono work, and/or activities that support family values and the community.

“We appreciate Dean Syverud’s role in recognizing the importance of maintaining a balance of legal perspectives at the school,” Yvonne Cordell says. “He has ambitious plans and is determined to lead the law school to greater prominence. We think there is no better way we can invest our resources.”

The couple also sponsors the Joseph Cordell Family Scholar in Law at the law school. Prior to forming Cordell & Cordell, Yvonne Cordell worked in the legal department of American General Finance in Evansville, Indiana. Joe Cordell, a CPA who worked at Arthur Andersen before earning a JD from the University of Texas at Austin, practiced law for a year at a large St. Louis firm.

“Our first five years building the firm were exciting,” he says. Yvonne Cordell adds, “But we decided that once we started a family, I would devote myself full time to raising and homeschooting our children.” Indeed, she left the practice in 1996, when their daughter, Caroline, was born. Elizabeth followed two years later.

Soon after, Cordell & Cordell began to focus solely on protecting the interests of men facing divorce. “We represented dads in some very tough cases—horrendous situations—where they were clearly the more qualified candidate for primary custody, but denied it due to their gender,” Joe Cordell explains. “This inspired us to serve their needs.”

“Paradoxically,” he adds, “our firm encourages clients to save their marriage when feasible. We typically represent the man who doesn’t want the divorce, the man who desires custody of the children and a financially secure future for his family.”

Today, Cordell & Cordell has more than 70 offices in 24 states and is the largest family law firm in the country. Newly hired attorneys enroll in an intensive, three-year program—known as Cordell College—that teaches litigation through a rigorous curriculum that promotes rapid career advancement.

“We can’t wait the eight- to 12-year maturation process traditional law firms have designed for associates to progress to senior management,” Joe Cordell explains. “That model permits over-hiring and large turnover. Ours is based on a teaching process that fast-tracks attorney development and enhances retention.”

The firm is greatly assisted by Cordell Practice Management Group—a separate entity of 100 employees who handle everything from marketing to human resources to training to client care—so the attorneys can focus exclusively on practicing law.

“We’ve worked hard to ensure that when Cordell & Cordell attorneys walk into courtrooms across America every morning, we have in place very strong systems and supports,” says Joe Cordell, whose firm has been featured in the New York Times, the Huffington Post, TIME, and on Fox News.

“Yvonne and I graduated from one of the best institutions in the nation, and we appreciate the outstanding legal education that has allowed us to do so much,” he says. “We’ve been blessed with the means to support what has been important to us. The law school is high on that list.”