

# Where Michigan Lawyers Work

By Naseem Stecker  
Photography by Carrie Pickett

A 110-year-old Victorian building that was once a parsonage stands sedately at the tree-lined corner of North Ball and West Oliver streets in Owosso—a town of 16,000 people between Lansing and Saginaw. The tranquil exterior and bucolic setting of this historic and charming downtown property near the banks of the Shiawassee River belies a different reality within—the busy practice of small-town lawyers Clark Shanahan and Gordon Hoy, who concentrate on criminal defense and personal injury. In 1996, their firm won the largest verdict in Shiawassee County's history when a jury awarded \$16.6 million in a patient's right case to their client—a severely brain damaged woman who was kept alive by a hospital against her wishes.

A visitor approaching the building from the front will inevitably notice the Greek portico, or porch with a roof supported by columns. "I think that Greek portico does something to people," observed Shanahan—



From left, associate John Homolo, Clark Shanahan, and Gordon Hoy under Greek portico

an Iowan who attended the University of Michigan Law School, got his first job in Owosso, stayed on, and has been in the profession for over 50 years. "It gets your attention and enhances the entry, although probably an architect would say 'my God! putting a Greek portico in front of a Victorian!'" Pointed arch windows and unusual eave supports for the roof overhang also add grace and character to the building.

Laid out in the shape of a cross, the parsonage, which was built by the First Methodist Church of Owosso, was converted into an office in the mid 1980s by another attorney, Jerry DesJardins, now retired in Florida. The present owners purchased the property in 1998 and changed little except to paint and to add some new counters and fixtures. "This is very sanctified territory," Shanahan remarked. Indeed, the building is flanked by four or five churches all within a short walk in what's known as the Oliver Street Historic District. Listed on the National Register of Historic

Places, the area is filled with opulent homes and religious buildings that reflect Owosso's historical, architectural, and cultural heritage.

Inside the law office, practicality and aesthetics fuse in various ways: beveled leaded-glass panels framing the main doorway lead to an access ramp; original wood trim with bull's-eye corner detail graces the small but elegant library. A cozy reception area and Shanahan's office take up the rest of the main floor. On the second level, there are three other offices and a common work area.

"This is the room where most of the work in the building gets done!" joked partner Gordon Hoy in his second floor office. "Only when he's here," shot back Shanahan. Hoy commutes 750 miles from Georgia, where he relocated in 1995, coming into town every Sunday night and leaving on Thursday evenings. He practiced in Shiawassee County for many years and was invited by Shanahan to join the partnership. When they won the patients' rights verdict, Hoy decided to stay—during the week anyway. "I just enjoy the small-town practice. It's a little bit easier to become acquainted with the judges and the court personnel. We know all the other attorneys that we're working with on a daily basis—it makes for a friendlier atmosphere."

If they had to do it again, practicing law in a small town would still be what they wanted to do. In fact, Shanahan can barely bring himself to retire. "About every week I plan to retire but then something comes along. We're going out shortly to see a farmer about a deed that he thinks he was deceived into signing, and we're both working on it, so if I do decide to retire, the transition will be seamless." ♦

Naseem Stecker is a staff writer for the Michigan Bar Journal. She can be contacted by e-mail at [nstecker@mail.michbar.org](mailto:nstecker@mail.michbar.org).



Original wood trim frames doors to cozy library on the main floor

*Exterior of Victorian building that serves as an office for Shanahan and Hoy*



*Beveled leaded-glass panels frame main doorway*



*Architectural details on roof line*

**Who:** Clark Shanahan and Gordon Hoy  
**What:** Small-Town Practitioners Give Parsonage New Life  
**Where:** 117 West Oliver, Owosso

