

Going SOLO in

William C. “Bill” Bowron is a solo practitioner in Traverse City who concentrates his practice in the area of probate and family law. Bill has a truly unique perspective on solo practice because, as you will see, he has practiced law in a number of different settings. I asked him to compare and contrast his experiences and to talk about life as a solo practitioner in northwest Michigan.

Bill Bowron is a native of Flint, Michigan. He is a graduate of the University of Michigan and the Detroit College of Law. His first post-law school service was as an assistant prosecutor in Genesee County, where he handled cases in the probate and district courts. In 1976, he moved to Traverse City and became a partner in what was then a three-person law firm: Thompson, Zirnhelt & Bowron. The firm became actively involved in the oil and gas activity taking place in northwest Michigan at that time. The firm grew to 14 attorneys and was one of the largest Traverse City-based law firms of its time. Bill served as managing partner of the growing firm and continued his practice in the areas of probate and family law.

Bowron is a member and past-president of the Grand Traverse-Leelanau-Antrim Bar

Association. He is a former corporate board member of the Northwest Michigan Alcohol and Substance Abuse Services, the State Bar Standing Committee on the Mentally Disabled, and the corporate board of Boy Scouts of America and Tall Pine Council.

In 1988, then-Governor Blanchard, recognizing Bowron’s leadership in the community and the legal profession, appointed him probate judge for Grand Traverse County to fill the unexpired term of the late Kenneth G. Mackness. While on the probate bench, Judge Bowron heard hundreds of probate matters involving guardianships, juvenile matters, and neglect and abuse cases. Upon completion of his term as probate judge, Bowron returned to private practice and is currently a solo practitioner in Traverse City where he concentrates on family law and probate matters. Here’s what Bowron had to say about life as a solo lawyer and practicing law in Traverse City.

Q: You have worked as a prosecutor, as a private practitioner in a large Traverse City firm, as probate judge in Grand Traverse County, and now as a solo practitioner. How would you compare and contrast the professional

satisfaction you experienced in each position?

My tenure as an assistant prosecutor was short and was many years ago and, although I did get assigned to the district court, the majority of my time was spent with the probate court. The then-new Revised Probate Code was just in effect and the mental health provision required hearings to determine if patients previously hospitalized involuntarily met the requirements for such hospitalization. Many of the hearings were held in the state mental hospital in Ypsilanti. Pleasant environment, but not a great deal of professional satisfaction.

The large firm experience, large from mid-80’s Traverse City standards, 14–15 attorneys, was primarily probate estates, estate planning, and title work, but a substantial amount of time was spent as managing partner with administration and personnel issues. Our firm, which emphasized oil and gas law, was involved in extended litigation against a major oil company on behalf of a number of individual land/royalty owners who were being short-changed by the oil company. My involvement in the representation was minimal; however, that did not stop my feeling of professional and personal satisfaction

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Traverse City

By John C. Schlinker

when the company wound up having to repay our clients.

My appointment to the probate bench by then-Governor Blanchard was certainly gratifying; on the other hand, the reality of being one of few Democrats that practiced law in Grand Traverse County and applied, kept my head from getting too big because of the appointment. While serving as probate judge, I took professional and personal satisfaction with the advancement of the juvenile programs my predecessor Judge Kenneth Mackness had initiated and with my own work with various juveniles that came before me. There were a number of times when I was asked how I liked the job that I responded that I couldn't think of a better job. (I must confess the excellent court staff I inherited was part of the attraction.)

Having said all of that, I must admit I have enjoyed my practice of law as a solo practitioner the last 5 years, with my legal assistant/secretary of 11 years, as much if not more than the above experiences.

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am also on the appointment calendar for neglect and abuse cases in Grand Traverse and Leelanau Counties and have taken appointments as Guardian Ad Litem in those counties and Emmet County for juveniles who have been victims of such abuse. Such neglect and abuse cases, often with horrible fact content, can occasionally provide an element of professional and personal satisfaction unique to that area of practice. It may be working with an abusive parent, or a neglectful parent with limited parenting capabilities, to assist them in recognizing the best interest of their child is served by releasing their parental rights and then helping them follow through with the release, or to work with a parent with limited skills, together with various service providers, until a successful reunification plan can be implemented.

Q: As a solo practitioner, do you ever wish you had partners or associates with whom you could discuss cases?

There are times it might be easier to simply stick my head in a partner's or associate's office rather than reaching a friend and colleague by phone, but I haven't had any difficulty finding a willing ear with an opinion or suggestion. When circumstances have re-

quired, I have also been able to bring colleagues into litigations to co-counsel.

Q: Do you face any special challenges in terms of conducting legal research as a solo practitioner? Do you use any electronic research tools?

Legal research has not been a problem. The Grand Traverse, Leelanau, Antrim County Bar Association, our local bar, has a good law library located in the Grand Traverse County courthouse in Traverse City and my former probate register is the librarian. Modern technology satisfies any other research needs I have. I am a Westlaw subscriber and ICLE partner and both satisfy my purposes.

Q: As a former probate judge in Grand Traverse County, I would assume you have some level of name recognition within the local bar. What efforts do you take to market your probate and family law practice?

It has been 15 years since I served as probate judge so the name recognition, except for other senior members of the Bar, or those who look at my picture hanging in the probate/family court, is suspect. I do frequently field questions from colleagues with good

memories, and receive a fair number of probate-related referrals.

Q. You are a native of Flint and practiced law as a prosecutor in Flint for a few years. How do you compare the quality of life between Flint and Traverse City?

I really can't compare the quality of life in Flint with the quality of life in Traverse City. I left Flint in 1976 and I am confident the quality of life in Flint in 2004 as it is in Traverse City, is far different than it was in 1976. In Traverse City in 1976, one couldn't find a store open on Sunday if you had a home repair problem and today you can probably have the requisite rough materials necessary to build a home delivered to your job site on Sunday.

Q. Traverse City is hardly a small town anymore. How would you describe the comradery among the local bar? Was it hard to establish yourself?

I believe that comradery continues strongly in our local bar, although I must confess, since I have been a solo practitioner, I have not maintained the same level of involvement I had in earlier years.

When I moved to Traverse City, I joined a friend from law school who had moved from Flint the year before, and our senior partner was a well established and respected member

of the local bar. There was a rather substantial influx of young attorneys about that time and our respective assimilation into firms and collective interaction greatly added to our getting established.

We, the new attorneys, had a blooper ball team for a number of years, which helped to build relationships with our fellow attorneys. Our team, of which I was the coach, wasn't good but we could always get pumped for our games against the team coached and pitched by our local notorious district judges.

Q. What is the biggest change you have noticed in the local bar over the past 25 years?

The biggest change in our local bar in the past 25 years has been its growth. I'm not sure of the number in 1976, but when I was president of the local bar in 1981 we had a membership of 131. Today our bar has a membership of 280 and there are a substantial number of local practicing attorneys who aren't members of the local bar. In addition to size, our bar has expanded its service to the local community with TARS, the Traverse Area Referral Service, together with its involvement with other community-based activities.

Professional courtesies among and between members has suffered a bit over the years, but based on various downstate encounters, I believe our local attorneys, for the most part, still exhibit a civility worthy of recognition.

Q. Do you have any difficulty keeping current on probate and family law in Traverse City?

The Institute for Continuing Legal Education (ICLE) does a very good job of making seminars and materials available in our area for both probate and family law. ICLE's "The Annual Probate and Estate Planning Seminar" has in fact been held at the Grand Traverse Resort, in Acme, for as long as I can remember.

Q. Does geographical proximity to a federal court or Michigan appellate courts ever present a problem?

I do not have much occasion to appear in the federal court system nor, for that matter, the Michigan appellate courts; however, when I have had my infrequent involvement with those courts, the 2¼-hour trip to Grand Rapids was not that big an issue. The federal bankruptcy court does have a monthly appearance in Traverse City, but my involvement there too has been limited.

Q. Would you recommend Traverse City, with its seeming abundance of lawyers, as a location for someone wanting to start a new practice?

I believe an attorney who moves to our area today, who has no prior relationship nor association with an established firm or clientele in the area, will have a very difficult time hanging up a shingle and making it. Appointments are available through the district court for misdemeanor criminal cases and the probate court for juvenile and neglect and abuse cases, but not with a frequency to maintain a practice. ♦



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