

MICHIGAN LAWYERS WEEKLY

www.milawyersweekly.com

November 19, 2007

2007 Up and Coming Lawyers



Michael Willis



Shaun Willis

Michael J. Willis and Shaun P. Willis

Steadfast faith in Jesus Christ is the heart of the young brothers' livelihood - a growing business law practice, loving families and the need to give back

By Natalie Lombardo

Brothers Michael J. and Shaun Patrick Willis consider practicing law an opportunity to serve others through God.

And they credit Willis & Willis, PLC, their thriving full-service business law firm, to Christian spirituality.

Since childhood, the boys aimed to be like their father, Van Buren County Probate Judge Frank D. Willis, who inspired and encouraged them throughout the journey by example.

"It's a mindset of serving our clients as Christ would serve us. We enter each case thinking we're doing the best we can with our God-given ability," Michael said.

The brothers pray for and about every client.

"About 99 percent of people think this is a really great way to run our firm. They're glad we're talking about faith and using it to help our clients along," Shaun added. "We've inspired more of the community to promote faith and to see that you can still be a Christian, using your principles to help grow your business."

Thanks to this compassion, hard work and unwavering faith, the firm's revenue has multiplied by seven since the first year.

When the brothers started Willis & Willis in March 2004, they also ran a painting and lawn service company to keep afloat. At the time, Michael was driving a 20-year-old truck "that wasn't worth more than its metal," and all of their student loans were on deferment.

Now the firm, with four attorneys total, represents approximately 100 clients a month. Ninety percent are referrals or repeat customers.

They recognize partner Darren M. Malek as a core component of the business as it evolves.

"A strong testimony of our success is driven on our ability to help shoulder our clients through life and continue to be their trusted perspective," Michael noted.

A certified public accountant, Michael concentrates his practice in the areas of estate planning, estate/trust administration and litigation, corporate law, elder law and real estate. Shaun specializes in civil, commercial, criminal and construction litigation.

In addition to serving the Lord and their clients, the Willis brothers wholeheartedly help the community. With 60- to 70-hour work weeks, they spend up to a third of their time on several volunteer efforts — and wouldn't have it any other way.

For example, once a month, Willis & Willis staff volunteer their services to people who otherwise couldn't afford legal assistance, at the Kalamazoo Public Library legal clinic.

They also founded the Corporal Christopher Kelly Willis Foundation, a nonprofit organization in memory of their fallen brother, which aids armed

forces.

Said attorney Jonathan Neil Jilek, who nominated the brothers for Up & Coming Lawyers, "Due to their selflessness and dedication, they are poised for even greater accomplishments in the future."

Q. Being brothers, do you work well together?

Shaun: A lot of our business contacts get to meet us both. They say, "Your brother's nothing like you." Obviously, we share the same beliefs.

Mike is organized, diligent in his work, very intense on making a wise decision after much thought pondering and also very constructed and conservative on numbers and business moves. I have more of an entrepreneurial, sales background. I like to keep things moving. It's not uncommon for me to come up with 20 different ideas and for Mike to shoot down most of them.

Then we agree on and go forward with one of those. A real asset to our firm is to have that polar opposite difference — to be creative but still make good, solid business decisions.

Q. Are there any cases you'd like to note?

Michael: We spent the last two years helping with the dissolution of our maternal grandfather Jack Kelly's trust. He was an onion farmer and pilot who developed Lake Doster and the surrounding community. When he died in 1980, he owned approximately 2,000 acres in the Allegan County area that later became Lake Doster. As trustees, we've been responsible for dissolving the trust, which held, at the time, about 900 acres of land. During the auction, we sold all 600 acres that were available. [The other 300 were available for lease with option to purchase.]

Shaun: It's been called the most complex real estate deal that happened in Michigan this year.

Q. Your father is Van Buren County Probate Judge Frank D. Willis. How has he influenced you?

Michael: Compassion. Our dad is a phenomenal model of that. In juvenile court for 30 years, he has redirected the lives of these kids and he absolutely cares every single day he comes to work On many occasions, I've seen him cry about the difficulty in life these kids had. He wants his practice to follow God, too.

Shaun: He taught us how to care for people no matter what walk of life they came from. He was one of eight kids raised by an indigent family with an

alcoholic, abusive father. He came out of that and became a judge. So he's serving with the knowledge of, "It doesn't matter where you come from, everybody needs help."

Q. Tell me more about the passion in your career.

Michael: Our firm is dedicated to Jesus Christ. We serve day-to-day for God and what we do. We live according to the Golden Rule; treat each other as you would want to be treated.

We're all just people on Earth here. Our belief is our job on Earth is to get closer to heaven. We come from that perspective that people are people first. Then they have a client matter, which is second. We hope to practice with a level of compassion.

Just prior to the start of Operation Iraqi Freedom, Lance Cpl. Christopher Kelly Willis was deployed to Kuwait — hand-selected for the Marine reconnaissance team, therefore on the front lines as his seven-man squad scouted the forward area for the 1st Marine Expeditionary Force. He came home a hero in June 2003. Six weeks later, Christopher died in a car accident.

Q. Tell me more about the organization you founded in your brother's memory.

Michael: The Corporal Christopher Kelly Willis Foundation supports the things he loved most, which was the U.S. Marine Corps and the world's children. He wanted to be a teacher and some kind of coach.

Shaun: It provides care packages to Marines. And we've bought all-expense-paid cruises, trips to Walt Disney World and the Super Bowl for them. This year, for a special request from a Marine captain, we sent school supplies for more than 300 Al Quam, Iraqi children.

Q. Let's hear about your family.

Michael: I'm married to Susan with three kids, Isabella, 4; Christian, 2; and Mary, 4 months. In a global perspective, God is the most important to me, my family is the next important, and everything else I do, frankly, pales in comparison. I've patterned my life to spend as much time with them as I can.

Shaun: My wife is Corrina and our children are Maria, 6; Patrick, 5; Francesca, 2; and Christopher Jr., 11 months. My family is my life and my career plays into that. My wife, Corrina, is extremely supportive of what I do and without her, I couldn't do the things that I do. And my kids give me something to work for.

Q. What does the future look like?

Michael: Our philosophy is to drive a lot of growth so that we can touch more people.

Shaun: You just look for God's grace in every day with a good attitude and try and balance it the best you can. We're trying to change the way law is practiced. We want to bring back a more collegial feel, where attorneys get along for the better of their clients.

Michael J. Willis

Age: 33

Position: Partner, Willis & Willis, PLC

Graduated: University of Michigan Law School (2000); University of Notre Dame (1996)

Professional affiliations: Christian Legal Society; American Association of Attorney-Certified Public Accountants; The Florida Bar; Corporal Christopher Kelly Willis Foundation; Vineyard Outreach Ministry; Notre Dame Club of Kalamazoo; Southwest Michigan Professional Network

Most valuable lesson from law school: Always be prepared ... especially for an 8 a.m. UCC class with Professor J.J. White.

On the younger generation of attorneys: As a whole, the younger generations of attorneys would be served well by learning from the many experienced counselors of the World War II and baby boom generations. Those generations of lawyers treated the practice with decency, respect and admiration.

Goal upon graduating law school: Never to go back to school.

On pain-in-the-neck lawyers: I don't know any. The counselors we interact with can be difficult, but only when they are zealously serving their clients.

What you would be doing if you weren't practicing law: Most likely teaching, probably high-school political science.

On what kind of reputation you'd like to have in the legal community: I would hope the legal community would look at our firm as honest, decent, concerned, ethical, bright and hard-working counselors continually striving to improve their clients' position and the local communities in which we live.

On how co-workers might describe you: They would probably describe me as hard at work trying to fulfill my life's mission.

Role models: My father, the Hon. Frank D. Willis, attorneys Michael D. Gibson and Peter J. Livingston, as well as the lawyers and staff of our firm including my brother, Shaun, Darren M. Malek, Christopher J. LaLonde, Pam Goheen and Ryan Wurtzel. I would be useless as a lawyer, however, without the support and love of my wife, Susan.

On where you'll be in 10 years: I'll hopefully be where God asks me to be. Submission to God requires one to be willing to change course based on His plan. If God wills it, our firm will continue to grow and continue to serve the Southwest Michigan community.

Advice for young lawyer wannabes: Do not enter the practice of law for money, reputation or power. Enter only based on a sustainable desire to serve others and to assist others in the finding of solutions to their problems or issues in life. A practice based in service to others provides the basis for a happy and fulfilled life; a practice based in the pursuit of money, reputation or power will ultimately bear no fruit.

Shaun Patrick Willis

Age: 31

Graduated: Thomas M. Cooley Law School (2002); Western Michigan University

Position: Partner, Willis & Willis, PLC

Professional affiliations: Christian Legal Society; Home Builders Association of Greater Kalamazoo; Big Brothers Big Sisters; Ducks Unlimited; Habitat for Humanity; Corporal Christopher Kelly Willis Foundation

Most valuable lesson from law school: Try to be invisible.

On the younger generation of attorneys: The old-school way I've heard is to get along with the other attorneys. Be friends with them and work toward the good of your client.

Goal upon graduating law school: Pass the Bar and get a job because we just had our first child, Maria, and my wife was not working either.

On pain-in-the-neck lawyers: As dear ol' Mom would say, "Kill 'em with kindness."

What you would be doing if you weren't practicing law: Run my brother's memorial foundation [Corporal Christopher Kelly Willis Foundation] full time, spend more time with my wife and kids and go on many hunting trips.

On what kind of reputation you'd like to have in the legal community: A lawyer who got things done right, and done ethically and morally.

On how co-workers might describe you: I would think they would say I am supportive of their careers and treat them with respect and members of our team.

Role models: Jesus, my trophy wife Corrina, my dad, my mom, my brother Michael, the folks I work with daily at our firm: Ryan Wurtzel, my trusted paralegal Pam Goheen, Darren M. Malek and Christopher J. LaLonde, as well as other attorneys Richard L. Halpert, John Allen, Thomas H. Blaske, Kelly L. Page and Joseph R. Leary.

On where you'll be in 10 years: Hopefully continuing to serve God by continuing to serve others, healthy and married with a couple more kids.

Advice for young lawyer wannabes: Talk to as many successful lawyers as you can before you venture out. Listen to what they say, apply the good things and heed their warnings. Always make God a part of your day; continue to pray about your clients and for your clients. Apply the Golden Rule to colleagues, opponents and your clients. Give back to your community, and your community will continue to give to you.

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