



A member of the board for the Oakland County Bar Association, Tom Howlett received the OCBA's Distinguished Service Award in 2007.

WRITE WING

'Super Lawyer' sports publishing pedigree

BY TOM KIRVAN

It's with more than a twinge of sadness that he watches the state of decline in the newspaper industry, a once proud profession that unceremoniously is becoming a vast wasteland for publishing companies trying to make it in an online-driven world.

As a former card-carrying member of the Fourth Estate, attorney Tom Howlett has too many newspaper friends and far too many fond reporting memories to sit back as a dispassionate observer as dailies around the country fall like dominoes across a giant game board.

Howlett, who has been recognized as one of Michigan's "Super Lawyers" three times, has a publishing pedigree that would make any newspaperman proud. In college, at cream of the crop Harvard no less, Howlett was a four-year staff member of The Crimson, eventually serving as managing editor of the student-run daily that dates back to the post-Civil War era.

At The Crimson, Howlett kept journalistic company with such colleagues as Jeff Zucker, a former "Today" show exec who two years ago was named CEO of media conglomerate NBC Universal, and

(continued on Page 24)

Photo by Robert Chase

Mike Miller, deputy managing editor of The Wall Street Journal, the second largest daily paper in the U.S. They all took pride in keeping the Harvard administration on occasional edge, revealing in one front page exclusive that Mother Teresa would be among the recipients of an honorary degree from the institution, uncovering a closely guarded secret on the Cambridge campus.

His first job, following graduation from the Ivy League school, was as an intern with The Los Angeles Times, where early on he would get his “feet wet” in a big way by helping with the newspaper’s coverage of a story that would reverberate around the world – the slaughter of 22 patrons at a McDonald’s restaurant in a section of San Diego.

During his stint with The Dallas Morning News, Howlett would earn statewide recognition for his feature on the travails of a woman whose husband had been killed when a jet crashed in 1985 on its final approach to the Dallas-Fort Worth Airport. Howlett’s report on the plight of the woman was part of the paper’s coverage of the aviation disaster that warranted Pulitzer Prize consideration the following year.

“The social problems that I got to cover as a reporter led me to law school,” Howlett said from his office in Bloomfield Hills, where he is an attorney and chief operating officer for The Googasian Firm. “As much as I loved being a reporter, I recognized fairly early on that in order to advance in journalism, in terms of job responsibilities and salary, you often had to be willing to move around from city to city and that becomes more of a consideration when you’re raising a family.

“Practicing law, on the other hand, often works differently,” Howlett explained. “There are usually benefits for lawyers staying in one location, to building a reputation that will have residual effects for years to come. That is a major reason why I gravitated to a career in the law.”

His work on the Dallas jet crash story sparked his interest in a legal career representing people affected by catastrophe, as he probed the unseemly side both of a world and a profession that was preying on a woman who tragically lost her husband in the accident in which more than 130 people perished.

“This woman had the incredible misfortune of having her husband killed while he was driving along the highway near the airport,” Howlett said. “He was

on a job-hunting trip to Dallas from Vicksburg, Mississippi. Within 12 hours of the crash, she was receiving unsolicited visits from attorneys seeking to represent her in an action against the airline. In many respects, her nightmare was only just beginning.”

Howlett’s detailed account of her journey through legal and social minefields was riveting and revealing, and eventually found its way to the desk of a family friend, George Googasian, long recognized as one of the finest trial attorneys in Michigan. Googasian, who has served as president of the State Bar of Michigan and as head of the Oakland County Bar Association, read the story with special interest. He, not surprisingly, was impressed with the scope of Howlett’s coverage, dashing off a note of congratulations to the young Dallas reporter.

“The social problems that I got to cover as a reporter led me to law school. As much as I loved being a reporter, I recognized fairly early on that in order to advance in journalism, in terms of job responsibilities and salary, you often had to be willing to move around from city to city and that becomes more of a consideration when your’re raising a family.”

“It said something to the effect, ‘Great story, but remember not all lawyers are bad,’” Howlett said of Googasian’s note. “It was a great message to keep in mind.”

It wouldn’t be long before Howlett would take the message to heart, enrolling in law school at the University of Michigan, where he would graduate in 1990. It was there that he met his future wife, Kim, an Ann Arbor Pioneer and Michigan State University graduate.

“Several of the stories that I worked on as a reporter really led me into the law,” Howlett admitted. “In some respects, I kept being in the ‘wrong place’ at the ‘right time’ as a journalist, especially when I think about the McDonald’s shooting and the Dallas jet crash. I also remember being assigned to write about pre-teen drug abuse and how kids in elementary school were feeling peer pressure to begin experimenting. I decided that I was more personally suited to becoming involved in trying to solve issues than reporting about them. I had a desire to be an advocate for people with problems.”

His first job was as a law clerk for the Hon. Douglas Hillman, then-chief judge

of the United States District Court for the Western District of Michigan. For the following four years, Howlett worked for a Washington, D.C. firm that specialized in 1st Amendment litigation.

And then an ad in a national legal publication caught his eye. “Practice Law in Paradise” was the attention-grabbing headline that prompted Howlett to inquire further. Six months later, Howlett, his wife, and first daughter were living in the Republic of Palau, a new island nation in the western Pacific.

“It had become a sovereign country in 1995 and was the newest member of the United Nations,” Howlett said of the tiny island nation some 500 miles east of the Philippines. “They were importing Americans to handle their legal issues after modeling their constitution after ours.”

During his first year in Palau, Howlett

served as assistant attorney general, eventually becoming counsel to the president of the country.

“In the first year, the cases ran the gamut, from a catastrophic accident involving the collapse of a bridge that caused deaths, to prosecuting people for ‘assaults’ with coconuts and beer cans,” Howlett related. “The cases were all over the board.”

The following year, Howlett assumed more of an advisory role, counseling the country’s president on a host of diplomatic matters, traveling to Taipei and Beijing as the nation was being wooed by the rival Chinese powers.

“It was a fascinating experience to live on an island that was a one-stoplight country with a population of only 20,000 people,” Howlett said. “Palauans have a sense of community and prioritize family.”

During his two-year stay in Palau, Howlett and his family lived in a modest home with a corrugated tin roof, which made it “difficult to think, let alone hear” when the almost daily rain shower came, he said with a smile.

“The humidity was just brutal,” Howlett said. “My wife used to remark



Photo by Robert Chase

Tom Howlett holds a treasured photograph of his father Jim (a retired attorney) with jazz legends Miles Davis, Charlie Parker and Max Roach dating back to 1948. Howlett said his father, a college student at the time, drove to Cleveland to hear the jazz greats play.

that Palau was ‘10 degrees hotter than paradise.’”

Upon his return to the States, Howlett moved to Michigan and joined The Googasian Firm in what would be a homecoming of sorts. Googasian, before forming his own firm in 1981 in Bloomfield Hills, had spent 17 years as a lawyer with Howlett, Hartman & Beier, at the time the largest law firm in Oakland County. Howlett’s father, Jim, practiced law with Googasian there. It was perhaps only fitting that the two

families would be reunited again.

“George had been a mentor to me long before I joined his law firm,” Howlett said.

Ironically, one of the first major cases the two collaborated on at the firm involved the 1997 crash of a commuter plane near Monroe that killed all 29 passengers on board. For Howlett, the case rekindled memories of his reporting days in Dallas covering the deadly crash of Delta Flight 191, an air disaster that investigators traced to wind shear. It would be among many complex and challenging cases that would

whet the legal appetite of Howlett over the course of his 12 years with the firm.

“If there is a common element to the cases we take, it is their complexity,” Howlett said of the general legal profile. “We do our best to help clients gain a measure of justice in cases that involve catastrophe and misconduct. We are selective in the cases that we handle.”

In recent years, the firm has successfully represented the family of a 6-year-old Dexter girl who was killed when run over by a school bus, while it also represented the family of a boy killed when struck by a snowmobile while skiing at a resort in Oakland County.

Howlett takes special pride in having helped an Oakland County man who was rendered a quadriplegic after he was pounded head first into the sand while wading in waist-high waters at a resort in Mexico. On the surface, it looked like an unwinnable case, until Howlett discovered that there had been a history of serious accidents involving “shorebreak” at the resort, including one on the day before the Oakland County man’s arrival.

“After almost a year of investigation, it had become clear that the resort operators had failed to act reasonably to prevent further accidents,” Howlett said, noting that the man involved in the incident now is head of a company created to help individuals suffering from spinal cord injuries. “That accident will live a long life with me.”

Howlett is even more passionate when talk turns to his family. He and his wife have two daughters, Jemma and Tessa, both students at Cranbrook. Jemma, 14, is an eighth-grader who has displayed talent as a cross country runner and actress. Her sister, 10, is in fourth grade and enjoys soccer and dance.

In late May, Howlett expects that his wife and daughters will be among those cheering him on as he competes in the Bayshore Marathon in Traverse City. It will be his fifth 26.2-mile event since turning 40, a feat that is all the more impressive considering his demanding work schedule.

“Running is a source of inspiration and strength for me,” said Howlett, who boasts a personal best of 3:28 in the Boston Marathon. “I hook up my iPod to Bruce Springsteen and think about hardship and good times. It’s an invigorating way to think about how great and how harsh life can be.” **M**