

UP & COMING LAWYERS



A salute to the rising stars of the Michigan Bar

George B. Donnini

Semper fidelis: Commitment to Marine Corps is still paying off to him in satisfaction, skills

George Donnini, a graduate of Duke University School of Law and a white-collar crime specialist at Butzel Long, will represent many polished professionals in his career, but perhaps none will be as special as a barely adult fellow with almost no hair.

Donnini served four years as a judge advocate in the U.S. Marine Corps, and often, he would be an Iraq-bound marine's legal link to the family left behind.

"It gives you a good feeling to draft up a will for an 18-year-old, someone who really doesn't need a will, but you give that young man some peace of mind," Donnini said. "You let him know you care about him."

Donnini's meticulous care with the young men and women headed for combat shows what he most prides himself on: perseverance, or what he calls "stick-to-itiveness."

Of course, Donnini's wife, Rebecca, once had a reason not to be such a big fan of his devotion to his commitments.

The tale starts in 1992, when Donnini, at 19, was a sophomore at The George Washington University in Washington, D.C. Fixated on becoming a military pilot, he signed up for Officers Candidate School. He planned to join the Marines right after graduation.

But then his vision started deteriorating.

"Every semester," he said, "I had to keep mov-

ing closer and closer to the front of the room."

By his junior year, he was wearing glasses, which eliminated him from pilot training.

He persuaded the Marines to shift his designation from ground forces to the law. When he graduated from George Washington, he took a commission in the Marine Corps Reserve, then went to Duke for law school.

After graduation, he clerked for a federal judge in New York City. Rebecca, also a lawyer, joined him in New York and landed a job at a top New York law firm.

They had an apartment in the city and were enjoying what New York offered.

Then, duty called.

The Marines wanted him. He was to report to Quantico, Va., for his training.

"Rebecca was of the mind I should resign (from the Marine Corps) and go to work for a firm in New York," he said. "We had a lot of discussions about it."

He was determined to fulfill his commitment.

"I finished my clerkship on a Friday," he said, "and by Monday morning, we were in Quantico."

They had traded their exciting New York lifestyle, including living in a building with a doorman, for an unglamorous apartment in what Donnini calls "lovely Stafford, Va."

What at first looked like a bad trade ended up paying off. While Donnini was marching,

Rebecca was matriculating at Georgetown University, from which she received a LLM in tax law.

The practice of military law was a constant exercising of his versatility. He did "a lot of defense, some prosecution," plus wills, divorces, estates, contracts, landlord-tenant disputes, even tax returns.

"We were not lacking for stories coming in the door," Donnini said. "The goal was to help them help themselves."

"You learn investigative skills."

Such skills are a huge part of his work at Butzel Long. His clients often are targets of federal investigations, so Donnini and his colleagues collect evidence and try to intervene with the investigators before charges are filed.

"If we can get involved early," he said, "we can explain why their (federal agents') case isn't as strong as they think it is."

"The government is never going to drop a case because of my good looks and charming personality," Donnini said. "I have to bring forth evidence that the agents might not have brought forth, present a different approach, identify weaknesses before the case gets brought."

In fact, he said, "Some of my best success stories are ones I can't talk about" because the clients ended up not being charged.

"As much as I like trying cases," he said, "I'll

avoid it if at all possible. It's a huge success when a (government) case goes nowhere."

Although he relishes the competitiveness of the courtroom, Donnini concedes that when he stands up in court to present a case, "I still get butterflies.

"Frankly," he said, "I'm glad I do. There's a lot at stake, and I want to do my best."

Sometimes, he said, he thinks he over-prepares, but part of his motivation is that he never wants to read his questions.

"If you're just reading your questions, you're not listening to the witnesses," he said. "And if you're not listening, the jury's sure not listening."

His goal, of course, is to win every case, but he calls winning "a sliding scale." Acquittals are nice, but sometimes, winning means staying out of court by getting pre-trial diversion for his client; sometimes it means keeping the client out of jail.

But no matter how much success he enjoys in his civilian practice, Donnini said he'll always treasure those years in the service.

"Helping get those Marines on the right path," he said, "that was the greatest thing I could have done."

— JIM STASIOWSKI

THE PRACTICE

Are you thinking about your job when you go to bed at night?

I try not to, but yes, I tend to do that. I do some of my best thinking when I'm asleep.

What one judicial ruling in U.S. or Michigan history has had the biggest effect on your practice?

Blakely v. U.S., federal-sentencing guidelines case.

What is the biggest myth about your profession?

There's seems to be a negative perception of lawyers, and I don't think that's justified. The negative perception is based on a small minority of lawyers who give the profession a bad rap.

What was the worst TV show about lawyers or the worst movie about lawyers?

"The Devil's Advocate."

How do you deal with pain-in-the-neck lawyers?

To me, pain-in-the-neck people are bullies, and you have to stand up to bullies.

In general, do you think judges' opinions are written clearly?

Yes.

Do you want to be a judge?

Depends on the kind of judge, but yes.

Finish this sentence: "By the time I retire, I hope I have ..."

Made a positive and sustained impact in my community.

WHO YOU ARE

Name a trait you inherited from one of your parents. From mom or dad?

Loyalty, from Mom.

Name a U.S. president you admire, and identify what one specific trait made him admirable:

John F. Kennedy, for his energy.

Name three Web sites you have bookmarked on your computer:

sec.gov; abenews.com; espn.com.

The one thing I have to do, but hate doing, is:

Taking out the trash.

Worst job you ever had:

In college, my job was to stand in line for Congressional hearings and trade spots with lobbyists who wanted to attend. A lobbyist charges \$500 an hour, so he pays the company \$50 an hour, and the company pays me \$20 an hour to stand in line.

What word or phrase do you use too much? (To my kids) "Stop doing that."

Your mantra, slogan, or words to live by:

"Semper fidelis," which means always faithful, which ties into my loyalty trait.

For high school and college English courses, you had to read novels. What was the worst one?

In my high school and college English courses, I thoroughly enjoyed reading all of the novels I was (forced) to read.

What is your greatest strength?

Stick-to-it-iveness.

What tangible possession do you most prize?

My wedding ring.

CHOICES

Dog or cat?

Dog.

Golf, tennis or bowling?

Golf.

Beer or wine?

Red wine.

Morning person or night owl?

Morning.

CNN, MSNBC or Fox News?

CNN.

"The Sopranos" or "Mad Men"?

"The Sopranos".

OPINIONS

Global warming: dangerous or overblown?

Neither of them really captures my feeling on it.

Who is the world's most talented performer?

Evel Knievel.

Age: 35

Undergraduate: BA, political science (minor in economics), The George Washington University, 1995, Phi Beta Kappa

Law school: Duke University School of Law, 1998

Employment: Shareholder, Butzel Long

Practice specialty: White-collar criminal law

Work experience: Intern-investigator, Public Defender's Office, Washington, D.C. (1994-95); summer associate, Sidley & Austin, Washington, D.C. (summer 1997); law clerk to Judge William H. Pauley, III, United States District Court, Southern District of New York (1998-99); judge advocate, United States Marine Corps (summer 1996, 1999-2003), served as both prosecutor and defense counsel in criminal courts-martial proceedings; served as legal assistance attorney in all aspects of civil law matters ranging from wills and estates, to landlord tenant, to commercial contracts, to family law and was in charge of a VITA tax center with over 40 military personnel as preparers and over 10,000 tax returns prepared in a single tax season; Butzel Long, Detroit, Michigan (2003-present).

Professional affiliations: ABA, Criminal Justice Section, Book Board (one of 10 members); ABA, Criminal Justice Section, White-Collar Crime Committee, Midwest Regional Co-Chair; ABA, Criminal Justice Section, White-Collar Crime Committee, Young Lawyers' Division, National Co-Chair; Federal Bar Association; National Association of Criminal Defense Lawyers

Other activities: Golf, bowling, running

Family: Wife, Rebecca L. Donnini (who is also a Duke Law School '98 alum and works at Honigman). We have three children: Alison, 7; George, 4; and Henry, 3.

Since 1980, which one losing U.S. presidential candidate should have won?

None.

Who is the wisest person you know?

My grandfather, who died in 1994.

You are in charge. Repeal one law:

The Michigan felony firearms statute, which carries a two-year mandatory sentence, which can lead to perverse results in certain circumstances.