



STAFF PHOTO BY KEVIN HARNACK

TAKING IT TO THE MAX

DIVORCE LAW LETS STEPHENSON HELP CLIENTS THROUGH TOUGH TIMES

By **MaryBeth Matzek**

Special to the Wisconsin Law Journal

When he meets new people and is asked what he does, Max Stephenson prefers to talk about family law rather than volunteering that divorce cases constitute the bulk of his work.

"People have a view of divorce lawyers that's not always positive," said Stephenson, an attorney at Gimbel, Reilly, Guerin & Brown. "They think you're someone trying to get money out of someone. It's not like that at all. I am there to help my clients through one of the worst times of their lives."

In addition to divorce cases, he handles post-judgment matters, Children in Need of Protection hearings and placement cases.

While his role is to be "a voice for my clients in the courtroom," Stephenson said it not always an easy one.

"People are under a lot of stress and, due to the emotions involved, everything is amplified," he said. "I am upfront with clients. They might not be happy at what I have to say and take it out on me, but I want to be honest."

Educating clients about what to expect is an essential part of what Stephenson does. He takes pains to explain court procedures and the legal rules concerning whatever case he's working on.

"Many clients are not thinking clearly since they are going through one of the most stressful parts of their lives. Attorneys need to explain terms and discuss what the reasonable results may be," Stephenson said. "I want to make sure they understand everything that is going on. I'll admit that I repeat myself a lot about the law, but sometimes it takes people several times hearing it before it sinks in."

Growing up, Stephenson knew he wanted to be an attorney.

"I always liked solving problems and, as a family attorney, that's what you're doing — you are helping people solve a problem in their lives," he said. "The problems get pretty complex, but that's what I enjoy — helping people through a tough problem."

Wisconsin Law Journal: What makes your work important to you?

Max Stephenson: I enjoy helping people through difficult situations and being a voice for them when they need help. I also enjoy being able to get into court a lot.

WLJ: Who is your hero in the legal field?

Stephenson: I'm a big fan of Alexander Hamilton — long before the musical. We all know about his role as a founding father and writer of "The Federalist Papers," but he was also a renowned litigator, who tried a lot of

important cases during the first years of this country.

WLJ: What do you do outside of work to deal with stress from the office?

Stephenson: I enjoy just hanging out with my wife and dog.

WLJ: What's one thing most people get wrong about what you do?

Stephenson: When you tell someone you're a divorce lawyer, they imagine Jim Carey from the movie "Liar, Liar." They imagine you as someone who is angry, but honestly the majority of family attorneys want a favorable outcome for their clients. They are not horrible people, but are trying to help people through a tough time in their lives.

WLJ: What's your favorite memory from law school?

Stephenson: I was very involved in moot court at Marquette University, and it was an awesome experience. I had a lot of fun with it and allowed me to stand up and advocate for something — not just sitting in class. I served as chief justice of the Moot Court Association and competed in the Jenkins' Honors Moot Court Competition, which only 20 percent of students get to do. I am still involved with the moot court and coach one of the teams now.

WLJ: Is there a certain case that stands out to you?

Stephenson: I think Obergefell vs. Hodges,

Asked & Answered

"Many clients are not thinking clearly since they are going through one of the most stressful parts of their lives. Attorneys need to explain terms and discuss what the reasonable results may be."

Max Stephenson,
attorney at Gimbel, Reilly, Guerin & Brown

which legalized gay marriage across the country, is a case people will look back at for many years. The case also showed how the judiciary can look at some of the statutes on the books and rule on them, making a big change especially when the legislative process can move so slowly.