



## Kevin Drendel

### Long Road to a Richly Satisfying Career as a Municipal Attorney

by Mike Bailey

BATAVIA — Kevin G. Drendel says that if he had known in advance the struggles he would endure to become an attorney, he never would have done it. But his clients, law partners and several municipalities in the Fox Valley are glad he did.

Drendel, of **Drendel & Jansons Law Group**, Batavia, is one of the Fox Valley's most knowledgeable and respected municipal law attorneys, even though the journey to arrive at that distinction was long and difficult.

“My dad (currently of counsel to the firm) was first in his college class at Cornell College (Mt. Vernon, Iowa) and went on to Harvard law. He returned to Kane County and joined Reid Ochsenschlager, the preeminent law firm in Kane County at that time, so those were some pretty big shoes to fill,” he remembers.

Drendel wanted to go a different way. “I went to Cornell but was an English major and in fact, I was a thesis away from a degree in religion. I got married and had two kids in New Hampshire” where his

wife was born and where the family lived for six years.

Eventually, he decided to get a Master's of Arts in teaching degree, but no in-state schools offered the program he was seeking. Reaching an inflection point in his career, he made a decision. “I decided I would go to Dartmouth and take the LSAT test. If I scored high enough, I would pursue a law degree. If not, I would go the teaching route.”

He scored very well but soon realized that law schools in the East are very expensive, something he had to consider given his young family. “I could get into the University of Connecticut, but I had no connection with anyone in Hartford so I decided to return to the Midwest,” he remembers, a bold decision for many reasons. “My wife, Beth, had never lived anywhere but New Hampshire. If she hadn't told me to go for it, we'd still be living in New Hampshire.”

So the Drendels returned home in 1988, and he enrolled in Northern Illinois

*(Continued on page 54)*



Drendel displays small mouth bass in Round Lake, Wisconsin, in 2008.



From left: wife Beth Drendel and Kevin Drendel in 2015



From left: nonprofit consultant Tom Okarna, Drendel, and his wife Beth at a 2015 Batavia Chamber of Commerce event

(Continued from page 52)

University because with two kids and no job, it was relatively inexpensive but still respected. He remembers his father was not encouraging. “He said, ‘Is that really

what you want to do?’” It wasn’t long before he asked himself that very question.

While he performed very well in law school (“I felt like a fish *in* water”), home life was challenging. His wife baked cakes,

sold crafts, and watched other people’s children to make enough money for the family to scrape by. “I treated law school as a job,” he says. “I went to class, studied during the day, went home and put the kids to bed and then studied several more hours each night. It was exceedingly hard. I had two kids and a third one born 12 hours after I took my last exam in my first year in school. If I knew what I was getting into I would not have done it. But going back (to his former life) was not an option.”

Although he graduated *magna cum laude* in 1991, the challenges did not end. Law school enrollment in that era was at an all-time high, which Drendel attributes to the rise in popularity of law-based television programs like *LA Law* and the emergence of women interested in entering the legal profession. While he graduated second in his class from NIU’s law school, employment was not a given.

“I interviewed at some downtown (Chicago) law firms, but I was just going through the motions to get experience. I knew I did not want to practice (in that environment). I applied at my father’s firm (where he had done an internship) because I felt I owed it to him. I’m not sure why I felt that way. There were 13 attorneys in the firm, and I had no contact with my father at all (during the hiring process). Another attorney was the managing partner and they liked me and offered me a job.”

It soon became clear that he fit in very nicely in Kane County.

“I met Kevin through his father when we were both partners at Reid Ochsenschlager,” says Aurora attorney Tim Reuland. “He has referred clients to us over the years and we have referred some to him. Kevin follows up with us after the referral to be sure they are settled in and getting the appropriate attention. That’s the kind of guy he is; he is absolutely committed to his clients, his community and his family.”

#### Kane County Bar Association Term

Just as importantly, Drendel is committed to the practice of law. He served for a term as the president of the Kane County Bar Association with distinction, making a huge impression on Jan Wade, the KCBA’s current executive director.

“I first met Kevin when I was hired as executive director of the Kane County Bar Association in 2001. At that time, he was serving as the KCBA’s secretary/treasurer, which meant that in a few short years, Kevin would be the president of the Kane County Bar Association. Kevin’s leadership in the KCBA was very solid and inclusive. He was responsive to the needs of the membership as well as to the needs of the staff. A very kind and compassionate person, Kevin led

(Continued on page 204)



## DRENDEL

(Continued from page 54)

the bar association very effectively.”

Kevin’s father also served as KCBA president as did others in that firm, she says. “I believe Kevin is very well respected by his peers both professionally and personally. A thoughtful and spiritual man, Kevin can be counted on for his honesty and his sincerity.”

The sense of community and family is very strong in Drendel’s life. His father had represented the Village of North Aurora since 1967 and as part of his initial duties, Kevin was assigned to continue that relationship, something that is ongoing today. In fact, Dale Berman, who was the village president in the 1980s, was recently elected again, reuniting the two men.

“My dad felt it was an honor and a civic duty to represent the municipality. He charged them a lower fee because he felt it was like giving back to the community,” a sense with which his son agrees. While his father is largely out of the practice, Drendel continues day-to-day representation of the village and has handled all the major annexations for the last 21 years, a period in which North Aurora grew from about 4,000 residents to 17,000 today.

“I’ve known Kevin since he was a baby,” says former and now current village president Dale Berman. “The Drendels have represented our village for over 50 years and have just done a super job. Kevin is easygoing and very responsive and has represented us well. I think the fact that he grew up here gives him a feeling of ownership of the community and it is reflected in his work. He is very professional.”

The market crash of 2007-08 brought significant challenges to the fast-growing village, but Drendel excelled at what he calls “cleaning up the messes” left by developers who went bankrupt or were unwilling to complete projects. Some of those developments had been largely completed when the crash hit, but some roads had not been completed. Others had underground utilities, but nothing else, while still others had failed part way through construction and had been taken over by the banks.

### Creatively Completing Developments

“Newman Homes had a 500-acre development here, and they got about 85 to 90 percent completed when they went bankrupt.” That forced the village with the help of Drendel’s expertise to get creative and complete the necessary work without unduly burdening the local taxpayers. It was a theme repeated throughout the difficult years that followed the real estate crash, a situation where North Aurora found itself squarely in the middle.

“We called letters of credit and used that money to complete projects. But we had to do that quickly because some banks also went under and if we did not call them before the FDIC took over, the law allows (that agency) to renounce those credit letters.”

In other cases in which roads were not completed, for example, the village had to prove to the bank that it was “on the hook” to complete them. In others, the municipality completed roadwork on private property but charged the property owners for the work.

“There were about 8 to 10 projects in the village in various stages of development,” Drendel says. “Some were about three-quarters built out, but the developers did not complete them even though they were not bankrupt. It was not economically prudent to do because other developments that were in bankruptcy were being bought (very cheaply).”

At the end of the day, taxpayers had to cover some of those uncollectable costs. “It becomes the taxpayers’ responsibility when others don’t fulfill theirs,” he says.

North Aurora still has a lot of vacant commercial property, unlike the city of Batavia, which his firm also represents. “Batavia had its commercial boom much earlier and most of that was already built out when the recession hit.”

The vacant land and economic slowdown has forced a decision for village leaders. Lately, he says, apartment complexes and condominium developments have been approved for construction on land once designated as commercial. The decision, he says, is to allow more rooftops to support the existing commercial developments before any more are approved. And, in one case, some industrial uses as well.

A parcel of more than 330 acres along Interstate 88 was originally annexed as commercial. Now, half of it is being developed as industrial in the form of a warehouse and distribution center. “There are no more big box store developments,” he says.

“The trend for retailers is to concentrate on on-line sales, and therefore the retailers need warehouse and distribution space. It’s a better economic model for them — small retail presence and large distribution centers.” The development of 1 million square feet on that 330-acre site will generate some jobs and property tax, but not the sales tax for which the village had originally hoped.

John Phillipchuck, a partner at Dommermuth Cobine West Gensler Phillipchuck Corrigan & Bernhard, Ltd. of Naperville, recently worked with Drendel on behalf of Continental Properties, a Wisconsin investment company, to amend an annexation agreement for a 300-unit apartment complex with some commercial

lots. The work also involved renegotiating some fees and other fairly complex issues.

“Kevin is very good about treating everyone with respect. He is very prompt and gets responses to us quickly. Time is money for developers, and he takes care to make sure we get everything we need in a timely manner.”

### Avoiding the Political Arena

Drendel says he takes the same pride in representing municipalities as his father did, building a community and shaping its future. He is not political and does his best to stay out of politics, recalling his father’s advice when he first began municipal law. “He said, ‘The show is for the board. You are not the show. Stay out of the political aspect.’”

Drendel’s family did not stop growing when he became a lawyer. With six children between the ages of 16 and 30, Drendel has participated in a wide variety of his children’s interests. He spent 18 years coaching wrestling, from youth meets all the way to national and international events in freestyle and Greco competitions. He also built stage sets when one son became interested in theater. And he has found time to fish in northern Wisconsin and Canada.

His children, sons Nathan, 30; Tyler, 28; Jonathan, 26; Nicholas, 22; Ryan, 20 and daughter Julia, 16, have kept him busy and occupied when he was not practicing law.

“When you start your career at 31, you never really get ahead of the curve,” he laughs.

One of his passions is writing, a skill he has worked hard to develop over the years. “I was an English lit major, and I love to write. I write blogs on current events and politics, do some faith-based blogging, and I have a small following. But I do it because I like to write.”

Another of Drendel’s passions is music, leading him to a seat on the board of the Fox Valley Music Foundation in Aurora. *Blues on the Fox*, which has grown into one of the premier music events in the Midwest, will celebrate its 20th anniversary this summer.

Members of the group — out of which the foundation grew — discovered some blues recordings made in Aurora in 1937-1938 that influenced the work of blues legends Muddy Waters, Howling Wolf and others. That resulted in a project to research the history of music in the Fox Valley, as well as other initiatives such as middle school programs and promoting local artists.

While the journey to becoming a widely respected attorney and contributing member of his community was not easy, the final product has been satisfying for him and the village he serves. ■