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## Harry Sieben Still Knows Your Rights

By Jim Walsh

Some lawyers have cases that have changed the law, and some are able to affect the political climate. Harry Sieben has done both, and in spades. And he has done something else: he changed the very way the business of law is conducted in Minnesota, all while building one of the state's premier law firms, Sieben, Grose, Von Holtum & Carey.

The practice of law was quite different 35 years ago. Advertising was illegal. Competition between lawyers was considered demeaning because the law was a "profession" and not a "business." In many states, it was illegal for lawyers to accept credit cards for payment because that was considered a form of fee splitting with a nonlawyer.

Oh, how things have changed. In 1977 the U.S. Supreme Court decided that banning lawyers from advertising was a violation of their First Amendment rights. Most lawyers still refrained from advertising, but Sieben opened the door in Minnesota to this brave new world. He spearheaded the previously unheard of marriage between law and advertising, and initiated the ubiquitous “Know Your Rights” campaigns that brought personal injury law to the people.

“After the U.S. Supreme Court declared unconstitutional the anti-advertising regulations that every state had,” says Sieben, “we started advertising in ’79. Consumers didn’t have any place to go to try to figure out what lawyers did what kind of work. So advertising gave us the ability to tell the public directly what we do, and where to go to find help.

“We were the first lawyers in Minnesota to advertise of any significance at all, and we’ve done it ever since with the ‘Know Your Rights’ logo,” Sieben continues. “At the time, a lot of lawyers didn’t think it was a good idea and looked down on it, but I didn’t care what they thought, particularly. Advertising still works for us; I don’t know why people think the way they do, but by having our name out there through advertising, it gives us an

aura of a substantial or larger organization that gives the public the confidence that we can handle things.”

Today the legal world without advertising is unthinkable. But opening the ad door is really only a minor part of Sieben’s contribution to Minnesota law and politics.

Upon graduating from the University of Minnesota Law School in 1970, the Hastings native joined the firm he would eventually help lead to great success—Sieben, Grose, Von Holtum & Carey. The 70-employee firm has offices in Minneapolis, Lakeville, Fairfax and Duluth, and employs 18 attorneys. From 1970 through 1984, Sieben was a member of the Minnesota House of Representatives, and speaker from 1981 to 1984.

Perhaps dearest to Sieben’s heart is his dedication to the U.S. armed forces. He served 36 years in the military—seven in the Army and Army Reserve and 29 with the Minnesota National Guard—and retired as a two-star general in 2003.

He has been appointed civilian aide to the secretary of the Army and as liaison between veterans and the military. He also is on the board of directors of the Civilian Marksmanship Program and the Minnesota Military Family Foundation.

And he continues to work for our soldiers. “I want to make sure military people get treated properly,” he says, sitting in his office in downtown Minneapolis. “It concerns me a lot, not because of any bad experiences I had in the military, but I’ve seen a lot of bad experiences that soldiers and airmen and sailors have had, so I get involved with quite a few stories, and a lot of them are sad.

“For example, there was a guy who was in the 82nd Airborne. Served with distinction, heavy combat in Iraq, not injured physically but suffered from [post-traumatic stress disorder], psychological effects of war, depression. The 82nd is a pretty macho organization, but he knew he needed some help. He went on sick call. They discouraged him from doing that; they told him to suck it up and get back to work.

“He went back to Fort Bragg in North Carolina to train for the next deployment, and when he was there he went AWOL. He just couldn’t take it anymore. Four or five months later he went back and turned himself in. They threatened him with desertion and said, ‘Sign these papers and go back to Minnesota.’

“So he did; he got a dishonorable discharge, left the Army, went to college, got his degree and got

accepted to medical school. But he couldn't get the psychological help he needed; he didn't have any money. Because of his dishonorable discharge, he wasn't qualified for the GI Bill or for [Veterans Affairs] benefits at the Veterans Center in Minneapolis. He was falling further and further behind psychologically, and he contacted Congresswoman [Betty] McCollum and she called me because I know her through DFL politics and she knows I'm active in the military.

"I got involved, wrote letters on his behalf, and eventually the Board of Correction of Military Records overturned the characterization of his discharge and gave him an honorable discharge. He qualified for VA benefits, and now he qualifies for a job at the VA, which is what he wants to do when he becomes a doctor: take care of veterans."

Sieben recounts all this with the exactitude and dispassion of a mechanic talking about an oil change. He is good at what he does, and he's also quick to point out that "that's a success story; there's a lot of others I couldn't get the bureaucracy to move or couldn't get something done." But his wide, toothy smile at the end of the story suggests that helping others gives him deep satisfaction and that some of his most gratifying work is coming these days, in the twilight of his

career.

Take a spin through the offices of Sieben, Grose, Von Holtum & Carey, and you begin to understand what drives Sieben. The office is a mousetrap maze of cubicles and computers that hums with a newsroom-worthy urgency. Fresh-faced attorneys, paralegals and office workers go about the day's business with a quiet conviction.

Sieben's office is in the far corner. A Minnesota state flag and the two-star general flag stand on poles at the doorway. His work attire this day is a sweater tucked into casual-fit jeans. Spend any amount of time with him and it becomes clear that his life work can be summed up by something he says with zero fanfare—"Part of being a Democrat is taking care of people who need help, and part of being a client's lawyer is the same thing"—and two quotations that hang on his wall:

"Forgive your enemies, but never forget their names."—John F. Kennedy

"A fellow that doesn't have any tears doesn't have any heart."—Hubert H. Humphrey

The rest of the walls and his desk are peppered with photographs and mementos. A color photo of his father, Harry A. Sieben Sr., rests next to a

sepia-toned portrait of his great-grandfather, J. George Sieben, in front of the Sieben family-owned drugstore in Hastings that burned to the ground 20 years ago. A photo of Sieben in an F-16 jet fighter in 2002 is next to a shot of him on a recent successful deer-hunting outing. The framed typewritten letter Sieben wrote to his parents in 1969 when he took his first job (with an annual salary of \$9,000) hangs near a snapshot of Sieben and his wife, Mary, a colonel and disabled veteran in the National Guard, in Paris.

“My wife was in Iraq and got hurt in an airplane incident,” Sieben says. “She’s not going to suffer financially, but she has a back injury that will prevent her from being employed or doing much for the rest of her life. But the VA is taking great care of her, and I’ve learned a lot about what they do from her experience.”

On his desk sits a family portrait from the wedding of his son Jeff, an attorney who works down the hall, and Sieben’s first grandchild. There are photos of him with his “idol” Dave Roe, former president of the Minnesota AFL-CIO, and former Vice President Walter Mondale. And there are the photos of the military people he knows and loves.

“This is from last March, at Fort Lewis in

Washington,” he says, holding a framed team photo of a group led by Gov. Tim Pawlenty. “We went to say goodbye to one thousand GIs that are in Iraq right now. I went to three of their funerals just a month or six weeks ago, and a fourth was killed this week.

“I’ve done several things with [the] Iraq [war]. I attend a lot of funerals and services for military members that are killed in Iraq and Afghanistan; mostly from Minnesota or close by. I participate in the Minnesota Army National Guard and the Army Reserve on their request to Congress for funding for equipment and improvements for facilities; I get involved a lot, and since it’s [a] volunteer [position], nobody can get mad at me if I don’t do something.”

At 66, Sieben is a grandfather of two. But his mind and heart, as it has been for the past 30 years as a legislator, attorney and general, is on how other’s grandchildren will fare in this complicated world.

“There’s a lot to this,” he says. “Soldiers in combat see and do some horrible things that people shouldn’t have to do. But they do them. Some of them are unaffected by it, or seemingly unaffected, and others are drastically affected. Some are injured physically, some emotionally, some both. I’ve been in the Wounded Warrior program and

visited Brooke Army Medical Center in Texas and Walter Reed Army Medical Center in Washington, D.C., to see these kids. Most are young.”

He pauses. Then goes on.

“It’s sort of a sense of service,” he says. “I went into the military in 1968, not by choice. The draft was on. I wasn’t drafted, but I would have been, and that’s why I enlisted. I didn’t have anything against the military, but once I got in I kind of liked it. I like military people and the system, so when I got out of the Army I tried to find a way to stay involved.”

And in so doing, he changed innumerable lives, just as he did for Minnesota law back in 1979.

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