

Chicago Daily Law Bulletin®

Volume 159, No. 117

Like mother, like son

Mary Ellen and Joe Swee pursue J.D. dream at John Marshall — while she fought off cancer

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Ever since Mary Ellen Swee took an American government class at age 14, she wanted to go to law school.

The now-57-year-old chose to wait to pursue her J.D., though, until all four of her children completed college.

Finally, two years ago, she began taking classes at The John Marshall Law School.

"The only thing that really burns me — besides a run in my stockings — is injustice," she said. "I want to defend the defenseless, like the infirmed, the elderly, those with special needs, children, women who suffer abuse. ... That class of person is dear to my heart."

And she isn't the only member of her family attending law school, either. Her 23-year-old son, Joe Swee, enrolled at John Marshall a year after her.

"I started here earlier, but as a part-time student, so we're about neck-and-neck creditwise," she said.

After graduating from Northwestern University in 2011, Joe first spent about eight months working for a Lake Forest public affairs firm. He had planned on going to law school a couple of years down the road, but his employer closed its local shop.

He was given the option to transfer elsewhere, but didn't want to leave the city. So he applied to law school, got accepted at Northwestern University School of Law and John Marshall, then chose the latter, he said, partly because his mother was already there.

"I'd been on campus and taken my mom to classes and I really liked the students," he said. "They

seemed very nice and on top of their work, like they cared about it."

Though the Swees are now on the same campus, they haven't had any classes together — yet.

"There might be some overlap in the spring," Joe said. "If nothing else, it would be fun to get into one together so we can egg each other on a little."

Mary Ellen's law school dream, though, almost never became a reality.

A month before she was set to return to the classroom, she was diagnosed with stage 4 breast and bone cancer.

"The only question I cared about asking my oncologist at Prentice Women's Hospital was, 'Does this mean I have to drop out of law school?'" she said. "I wasn't thinking, 'Am I going to die?' or 'How hard is this going to be?'" I thought, "I have to go to law school."

After her first day of torts class, she took a cab to the hospital to undergo her first chemotherapy session.

By the time finals rolled around, her hair was gone and she was wearing a wig.

"In the middle of the torts exam, after two hours, I looked up and looked out the window and thought, 'What am I doing here?'" she said. "Then thought to myself, 'Look back at the test. Finish the test.'"

Her family banded together, she said, to help her through treatment. Joe drove her the 1½ hours from their home in north suburban Lake Bluff to her radiation appointments.

Along the way, they listened to Federalist Society podcasts and Supreme Court oral arguments together.

"That was the summer before I



Mary Ellen Swee



Joe Swee

was going to law school," he said, "so there is no single better prep in the planet you could have than what we did."

In November, Mary Ellen's condition was deemed stable.

But just two days later, life threw the Swee family another curveball.

Mary Ellen's husband, Bob, was diagnosed with stage 4 throat cancer.

When he started his treatment, family members were unfazed, they said.

"We already had practice," Joe said. "It was easy for us to be able to share the driving and find fun things to do and plan movie nights to make sure my dad was comfortable."

His father, an emergency room doctor who mainly works at a Kenosha, Wis., medical center, has now completed his treatment, received a stable condition report and returned to work in March.

Meanwhile, at school, the Swees may not be in the same classes but that doesn't stop them from bouncing ideas off each other.

"We like debating about the law a lot when we're walking the dog or driving around," Joe said. "When you're researching the law and you can ask another person — even if we haven't studied it in the same way — you know enough about the law to know if they're on the right track."

His mother agreed.

"We've read the same texts," she said. "We've used some of the same books and had some of the same professors, too. You will always find someone to disagree with. We can push each other to make sure the other person understands it as much as they should."

Ellen J. O'Rourke, an adjunct professor at John Marshall and an associate at Bruce Farrel Dorn & Associates, had Mary Ellen last year in a lawyering skills class.

"She had a great attitude about being there and learning," O'Rourke said. "Not all students are like that. I really enjoyed having her in the class. She was a hard worker who was always looking to learn more."

Walter J. Kendall III, a professor at John Marshall, taught Joe in a spring class. The Swees going to the same school offers advantages to both of them, he said.

"The problem with a lot of people going to law school is they don't have enough life experience to understand the subtleties and nuances," Kendall said. "To the extent that Joe talks to his mother about the law, I would assume it helps them both. They could graduate No. 1 and No. 2 — who knows?"

Joe plans to finish school in December 2014, and his mother plans to complete her degree the following spring.

Joe wants to defend medical-malpractice cases.

"It seems like an area of law when I wake up on any given day, I can feel really good about going into the office," he said. "Since my dad is a doctor, I have a very favorable view and feel like I could help them out."

Mary Ellen has also developed an interest in medical malpractice and the two said they might work together, if given the opportunity.

That doesn't mean they'll see eye-to-eye all the time — arguments might still occur, she said.

"We will need soundproof walls," she said with a laugh.

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