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Lasting Impression

Injury firm Walkup, Melodia, Kelly & Schoenberger's reputation shines after 6 decades.

By Shane Nelson

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Longtime litigator Douglas S. Saeltzer knew early he wanted to try cases.

“Once my dreams of becoming a professional quarterback were crushed in middle school, I realized I would have to find alternative work,” the Walkup, Melodia, Kelly & Schoenberger shareholder said with a laugh.

“I assumed all lawyers were trial attorneys in court, doing what you see on TV,” Saeltzer recalled. “And I said to myself, ‘I want to do that.’”

After completing his law degree in 1994 and passing the bar, Saeltzer enlisted in the U.S. Army, joining the 82nd Airborne Division and the Judge Advocate General Corps, where he prosecuted criminal cases at Fort Bragg, North Carolina.

“If you are young and you want to actually do trial work, ... the only client dumb enough to give you that responsibility is the government,” he said, chuckling again.

When San Francisco personal injury firm Walkup, Melodia, Kelly & Schoenberger later offered Saeltzer a chance to continue trying cases in the late 1990s, he didn’t spend much time worrying about the jump from criminal to civil work.



Photo courtesy of Walkup, Melodia, Kelly & Schoenberger

From left, shareholders Khaldoun A. Baghdadi, Michael A. Kelly, and Douglas S. Saeltzer

After more than 20 years at the firm, he’s had the chance to try many cases and realize those courtroom dreams that date back to his adolescence. The tremendous satisfaction he now takes from helping clients has, however, been a development he didn’t see coming in middle school.

“I just feel incredibly lucky I ended up at a place where I’m doing something I really believe in for people I believe in,” he said. Firm shareholder Khaldoun A. Baghdadi shares in that immense satisfaction Saeltzer said comes from helping clients. A Palestinian immigrant born in Jordan, who was raised in Southern California,

Baghdadi also wanted to be a lawyer early.

“I wanted a member of our family to understand the rules and advocate for us and advocate for other members of our community,” he said. “And I thought being a lawyer would be the most effective way to do it.”

Baghdadi was no stranger to hard work as a kid.

“A financial genius to me is someone who can put three kids through college on an hourly wage,” he said of his father, who worked in mini-markets and managed gas stations.

Heavily involved recently in the PG&E bankruptcy case, Baghdadi has earned big victories for clients in product liability

suits over his two decades at Walkup, Melodia, Kelly & Schoenberger, including a billion-dollar verdict in a hip implant case.

“We encounter clients at the worst times of their lives,” he said. “And we do what we can within the legal realm to help repair that. ... I find that very fulfilling.”

Shareholder Michael A. Kelly, who’s been at the firm for 40 years, insisted his personal injury practice is intensely personal.

“My clients are my friends,” he said. “When you work with somebody who may have lost a limb or lost their livelihood or lost a loved one, spouse or

child there are a number of bonds that develop, and it's hugely satisfying."

Kelly has been a key part of the PG&E wildfire cases in Northern California as well as fire suits in Southern California in recent years. And over his four decades at the firm, he's handled a host of large automotive liability and wrongful death matters as well as medical device and malpractice cases, with a specific focus on Kaiser Health.

"Mike Kelly is just an absolutely terrific trial lawyer," said Dale L. Allen, a San Francisco defense litigator who has opposed Walkup, Melodia, Kelly & Schoenberger more times than he can remember over his 30-year career.

"When my partners and I get a case against the Walkup Firm, we know we're going to be in for a tough go," he said.

"But it's also going to be one where everyone can go out afterwards and get along."

Bay Area defense litigator P. Christian Scheley, who has opposed Walkup, Melodia, Kelly & Schoenberger many times in the last 15 years, described the firm "as good a group of trial lawyers as I've ever known."

"I'm wary of them because they're very good, so I've got to be on the top of my toes," Scheley added with a chuckle. "But I've got nothing but respect for them."

Scheley opposed Baghdadi years ago in a 30-day trial involving a wrongful death suit featuring drunk driving allegations. Scheley filed 56 motions in limine during the case — some related to Fifth Amendment concerns — because his client was serving jail time on criminal charges he was appealing.

"Walkup actually filed a motion in limine to preclude us from filing further motions in limine," Scheley recalled, laughing. "Khaldoun knew the damn evidence code better than anybody I've ever run across, particularly in terms of the sections and subsections, so those were fun arguments. ... And he gave quite a good closing argument."

Founded in 1959 by legendary plaintiffs' litigator Bruce Walkup, Kelly said the 20-lawyer firm has always been a shop where mentorship is a core tenet, and young attorneys are encouraged to reach their full potential.

"I like to say there are no sharp elbows here," Kelly explained. "I am so proud of the fact that all of the people here are not in anybody's shadow. ... And really, the proof in the pudding here is that in the last 25 years no lawyer has left this firm."

All of the Walkup trial attorneys interviewed were quick to admit they miss the courtroom. And while Kelly said some courts are now making "embryonic gestures" toward the eventual resumption of trials, he doesn't expect to see a case in trial until after the first of next year.

Video hearings, however, have become a regular part of the firm's workload, and Baghdadi said, now more than ever, a disciplined, concise strategy is critical when appearing before judicial officers.

"You're gambling if you're spending more time than absolutely necessary on a video link," he explained. "There are too many things that can go wrong, from your Zoom backgrounds to your audio freezing. And you do not want that to be what the judge recalls from your argument."