

80 Years of Independent Law: Abrahams Kaslow & Cassman Builds on Strong Foundation

By: Leo Adam Biga March 29, 2024



From left, Co-Managing Partners Rob Schartz, Tom Malicki and Randy Hanson. (photography by Debra S. Kaplan)

When Omaha legacy law firm AKC (Abrahams, Kaslow & Cassman LLP) launched in 1944, attorneys were not yet as omnipresent as today's relative glut.

The nation was at war and two bright young Jewish attorneys and fellow Creighton Law School graduates, Milton Abrahams and Ben Kaslow, merged their business law practices into one. They made a formidable team. With the arrival of Frederick "Fritz" Cassman in 1949 the AKC triumvirate of founding partners was complete. Eight decades later AKC has grown and is still going strong. Partner Howard Kaslow carries on what his late father Ben helped start. 2024 marks the son's 60th year in practice at a firm celebrating 80 years of serving clients.

Kaslow, a Yale Law School graduate and Rhodes Scholar, entered the firm in 1964. Kaslow ascribes his early interest in being an attorney to seeing the strong relationships his father and his father's partners enjoyed with their clients.

"It was very obvious their clients had great respect for them and spoke highly of them and that Milt, my father and Fritz were dedicated to their needs. Those relationships certainly made an impression," Kaslow said. "Many clients were family friends whom I knew personally. It just struck me as a profession I would like to go into. "That our firm has continued for 80 years is a great pleasure to me. There aren't a lot of firms that can say the same, so we're all very proud of that. I think the reason for our continuity is simply the fact we've had wonderful, excellent young attorneys join us. Most of our attorneys have been here through their entire career. They started here and have been trained by not just me but other older members of the firm. We've just created an environment where everybody is pleased to be here, enjoys the work, enjoys the people. I think people enjoy what they learn here in becoming good professionals and I hope that will continue for the future."

Currently, the firm's managing partners are Randy Hanson, Tom Malicki and Robert Schartz. Malicki, a Creighton Law School graduate, has spent his entire 37-year legal career at AKC. He came on board in 1987 and became a partner a handful of years later. Kaslow mentored him.

"He taught me everything I know," Malicki said of his mentor. "I learned about law and life and everything you can think of. He is a very good standard to try to attain. Don't know if I'll ever get there. He is a brilliant lawyer, a wonderful person, a great colleague, a great friend. He shows you by way of doing as opposed to just telling how to handle certain things. I've been very blessed to have him in my career and in my life."

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HOWARD KASLOW, PARTNER,
ABRAHAMS, KASLOW & CASSMAN

Schartz, a Creighton University Law School grad, joined AKC in 2009 after a stint with the Douglas County public defender's office and years with a medical malpractice firm. He knew of AKC before ever working there.

"The firm's and its founders' reputations preceded them," Schartz said. "Many of our partners have dealt with generations of business owners and their successors, their children, their grandchildren," he said, adding that he's pleased to be a part of a firm "so deeply rooted in the Omaha legal community."

"We're a great blend and range of both experience and in-house commitment to our clients. There's a lot of continuity and breadth of experience. We don't have a ton of turnover," said Schartz, who became a partner a year after joining AKC.

Should the firm make the century club and beyond, Kaslow is sure its managing partners won't have anything like the combined 112 years of service with AKC that he, Malicki and Schartz own. Its office staff also boasts long-tenured employment.

"You just don't see that so much anymore," said Kaslow, who appreciates that continuity extending to clients. "I've had the privilege of representing several clients for three generations.

"That they would consider wanting to remain clients of the firm is a very rewarding thing both personally and professionally. Sometimes relationships with clients go beyond just the performance of legal services. I certainly find that to be the case in the estate planning and probate aspect of the practice, where a lot of my discussions with clients have to do really with their personal objectives and how they can best attain them. Part of our role in certain areas at least is more as a counselor than as a lawyer, and that's important, too. Continuing to work with clients that I like and have represented for many years really is the most important thing at my stage of the practice."

Right Fit

Malicki enjoys the intimacy and intensity of the work.

"The clientele we've been able to attract and to work for is very satisfying," he said. "It's complicated, challenging work. Because it's a smaller firm you get to have a lot more personal interactions with people, so you develop friendships as opposed to just client relationships over time."

What's kept AKC a player all these years, Malicki said, "is culture for the most part – and being able to pass that culture down. We're a very unique law firm in that we don't argue amongst ourselves. We're all committed to

the same path, same goal. People are treated fairly. People don't feel taken advantage of. We've been lucky to be able to attract bright young lawyers and to train them along, so the quality of lawyer we have here is high. The quality of the legal work we do here is very high."

Years of institutional knowledge, professional experience and expertise are shared by veteran lawyers with newcomers.

"We have a huge mentoring program where every associate is assigned a partner as a mentor," Schartz said. "That really helps train them but then also instills the firm's culture in the next generation of lawyers to be mindful of taking care and making sure you have excellent work product and provide a value-add to our clients." Malicki feels the firm's size is an advantage in other ways.

"The smallness allows for a more collegial atmosphere," he said. "Larger firms are more corporate. Here it's more entrepreneurial because you're not just sitting in your office working, you're also getting the clientele, keeping the clientele, servicing the clientele, teaching the younger lawyers. All that continuity continues throughout the years, and that's the best. We have a very good core group of people and they all share the same values and thoughts on how to make a good law practice work."

Bread and Butter

AKC has largely stayed in its lane focusing on corporate and business law, employment law, franchise law and real estate law. Energy law is a more recent focus.

"The bread and butter of the practice has always been estate planning, corporate transactions. Litigation of various types," Kaslow said. "We don't really do much criminal law representation but more commercial litigation and defense work for other professionals (medical, insurance). Those have always been the areas we've been involved in."

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ROB SCHATZ, PARTNER, ABRAHAMS, KASLOW & CASSMAN

A big change in the course of his career, he said, is "the vast expanse of administrative law dealing with all the federal and state agencies that exist today" that didn't when he started.

"There was no Environmental Protection Agency. No Employment Retirement Security Act dealing with pensions and profit-sharing plans. No Limited Liability Company Act," he said. "We practiced common law, if you will – case law, contract law, the law of employee relations. But it's changed dramatically over the years as more and more administrative law has come into existence."

Just as the medical profession has become ever more specialized, so too has the law.

"The areas of the law that require or need some expertise today are so numerous that it really is impossible for any one attorney to be an expert in everything," Kaslow said. "To a certain extent all attorneys have become specialists with work concentrated in only one or two areas. For example, I work primarily in the area of estate planning, trusts, wills, probate administration and corporate transactions.

"I don't do any litigation. I wouldn't probably be able to find my way to the courthouse. But we've got a firm that can provide expertise across the whole range of business or personal needs, so if something comes up that I don't know about the first thing I do is find attorneys in the firm that do and make sure they get involved."

"We have a very active, open-door policy where a lot of times clients are getting several heads for the price of one because we bounce ideas off of and talk about cases with each other all the time to get really good results," Schartz said. "We're more of a full-service law firm and we're able to handle many aspects of a client's legal needs as opposed to saying we're just able to do this and you have to find somebody else do that.

“I always look to the experts on the other side of the hall like Howard and Tom for their intimate knowledge of the probate code and the trust code and utilize them in defending or prosecuting a case when we’re representing a client in that area. We work with each other really nicely and share that knowledge.” Working together to satisfy client needs is what it’s all about.

“Getting results is what really solidifies those relationships,” Schartz said. “One follows hand in glove with the other.”



Photos of

The founders of Abrahams Kaslow & Cassman hang in the office: Milt Abrahams, 1905-2000, Ben Kaslow, 1907-1993 and Fred Cassman 1925-2019. (photography by Debra S. Kaplan)

Getting and keeping clients, Kaslow confirmed, “is really all reputation based – people that have had a good experience with us or know that we have experience in a particular area is where the word of mouth and referrals come from.”

The legacy of AKC must be continually nurtured. “You can’t take it for granted at all,” said Schartz.

Forward-thinking

Besides new areas of specialization in the law, Malicki said technology is the other big change AKC has weathered.

“I do think with our size and structure we’re able to adapt to more things and to deal with change without too much disruption,” he said.

Kaslow said what sets AKC apart is its membership to Meritas, an invitation-only international association of law firms. AKC is the only Meritas firm in Nebraska.

“It’s certainly been a benefit to us,” Kaslow said of the association. “When we have a client who has an issue in another state that we think we can’t address we can refer the client to somebody we know is a reputable firm. And it’s reciprocal – we regularly receive referrals from firms outside Nebraska.”

For AKC’s partners, the firm’s fixture spot on the local legal scene is not enough. They set an example of community service they expect and encourage their attorney partners and associates to follow.

“We like people to have a good work-life balance,” Kaslow said. “We’ve always had a history of being involved in the community at large in terms of charitable and nonprofit activities.

“That’s something we try to get our people involved in. Community involvement is very important not just to give back to the community but also just to make relationships in the community. I know that’s something I’ve

always valued and so I've been involved in a number of nonprofit organizations, serving on their boards of directors. It's enabled me to meet a panoply of people I would never have met otherwise."

At 85, Kaslow has no plans to retire. Not yet anyway.

"As long as I enjoy it and my clients want my services I'm happy to continue. I don't have any target date to phase out. But at some point I'm sure that will occur," he said.

Meanwhile AKC is planning 80th anniversary celebrations for current and past staff, clients and friends. That milestone is cause for reflection.

"I've been a part of building that up and maintaining it and continuing to make it grow, which gives you a really good feeling – that you actually have made that investment and that investment has paid off. That's what you do feel the pride in," Malicki said.

For Schartz that eight-decade legacy "is a real testament to those who have come before us."

"We take the responsibility as managing partners here very seriously to keep that going and to keep our reputation as stellar as it is. I think everybody here is focused on that singularly," he said.

Kaslow shares his partners' confidence AKC's built a strong enough culture to continue thriving. How much longer, he said, is anyone's guess. He believes the future remains bright as long as AKC "keeps attracting promising talent" that takes "pleasure," as he does and the founders did, in gaining people's trust and serving their needs.

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