

THE HYZERS

Shaping Rockford's Past, Present, and Future

by Elizabeth Davies

ROCKFORD—In the small law library at **Hyzer Hyzer & Jacobs**, the walls are lined floor-to-ceiling with books.

The texts are mostly antiquated. The words on their pages more easily are found on a computer screen these days.

But for Keith Hyzer, an attorney with five decades of experience under his belt, the books still have a place in his firm.

It keeps them focused, challenged—and happy. Even when they try, the pair can't let their minds drift too far from the law.

"Sometimes we have to say to ourselves, 'OK, we're out of town. We're going to relax and not talk law,'" Nancy says. "Then the other says, 'You're right!' And 10 minutes later, we're talking about it again."

While their paths tend not to cross much

visions of a big career in television news.

She worked at a local Rockford television stations during the summers and was fascinated with an industry that was, at the time, relatively new.

"I really liked what I saw in television, the writing and production of it," she says. "I had envisioned myself going to downtown Chicago, walking into NBC and saying, 'Here I am.'"



"We don't use them much anymore," he admits. "But I still like having them around."

Hyzer, who opened his firm in 1976, has since built a successful real estate practice with his industry know-how and years of expertise. A key contributor in the firm's growth has been the longtime confidant by his side: wife and legal partner Nancy Hyzer.

While others their age—Keith is 79 and Nancy is 71—might spend their days gardening or volunteering, the Hyzers still put in full workweeks and take on complex legal cases.

during the day—Keith focuses heavily on residential and commercial real estate while Nancy specializes in development and redevelopment—they tend to catch up on one another's work while getting dressed in the morning or over dinner at night.

But when they're on the job, the Hyzers do what they've always done: Work hard, work ethically and work fairly.

Nancy Hyzer: A Second Career

As a young college student, Nancy had

In the end, though, those were days when women had only a few career choices: teacher, nurse, secretary. Though her father was a successful Rockford lawyer, her mother suggested she pursue "something more practical."

So with a teaching degree under her belt, Nancy settled into married life and began raising three young sons. She later divorced, and then married Keith in 1976. She agreed to help him around the law firm—then just a start-up—while their youngest child was in kindergarten.



The Hyzers enjoy a visit to Hoffbrau Hous in Munich during a 1989 trip to Austria and Germany with the Winnebago County Bar Association.

Very quickly, she began taking on more and more duties at the firm, until there was nothing left except the actual practice of law.

“It was obvious she could do the work,” Keith says.

So with her husband’s encouragement, Nancy headed to Northern Illinois University to attend law school at the age of 41.

“Most of the kids were just out of college, but I wasn’t the oldest in my class,” she recalls with a sly smile. “He was two years older and I was very quick to point out that I wasn’t the oldest.”

Still, she questioned her decision to return to school in her 40s.

“My biggest fear was that I couldn’t cut it any longer,” she says.

What she found, however, is that attending school later in life has its advantages.

“You bring a different set of skills than you did 20 years ago,” she says. “Of course, I was much more grounded and probably more healthy. I was getting regular sleep and eating regular meals. Obviously, I had the maturity that I didn’t get caught up in distractions.”

And when she graduated from law school, Nancy had a job waiting for her in the office next to her husband’s.

“Keith has quite a stable of lawyers that he has mentored over the years—I’m just one of them,” Nancy says. “I can’t emphasize enough how much of my training is attributable to what I learned on the job. Keith’s door was always open. He always has time for us.”

And that’s a favor Nancy is quick to return. She currently serves on a steering committee for a new mentoring program being launched in the Rockford area. For her, it’s exciting to see intelligent young women enter the legal industry—an option that wasn’t readily available to her generation.

“When I see the doors open and the earth

shifting in opportunities and expectations for women—well, women today can do anything,” she says. “They see role models, women who are successful and competent lawyers.”

Today, much of Nancy workload focuses on what she calls “projects”—historic buildings that are being redeveloped for a new use.



The Hyzers relax at John Gorarty’s Bar in Dublin during a 2009 trip to Dublin with the Illinois State Bar Association.

She’s been instrumental in seeing one of the city’s oldest elementary schools turned into an apartment building, along with new townhouses around the block. The revitalization, in a struggling area of town, has garnered statewide honors.

“You begin to look around at the houses in the neighborhood and you can see the changes and the way people in that area have responded to rejuvenation,” she says.

For this Rockford native, there’s a special sense of purpose that comes from seeing the city of her childhood transform with a new purpose.

“I drive by the Richardson building, and I

remember when that building was...a dress store back in the 40s and 50s,” she says. “And now I can see how beautiful it is today.”

Reflecting on her “new” career—now 27 years in the making—Nancy sits back in her chair. Her office window looks out over a still Rock River that appears to be resting in wait for the winter ahead.

“I’m very glad I did this,” she says. “I don’t know what my life would be like if I didn’t have this second career. It’s been exhilarating and satisfying.”

Keith Hyzer: A Rockford Staple

When Keith was growing up in a small, rural town in central Illinois, his mind was firmly planted on sports. Between basketball and baseball, he had few thoughts about becoming a lawyer.

But Keith knew he wasn’t cut out to follow in his father’s footsteps. His dad was a mechanic and ran a service station in town. One day, young Keith did an oil change on a car but forgot to replace the drain plug, leaving a trail of oil down the driveway.

His father shook his head.

“He looked at me and says, ‘You’d better go to college. You’ll never make it as a mechanic,’” Keith says, laughing at the memory.

Indeed, Keith became the first in his family to graduate from college, with a degree in political science from Knox College. From there, he pursued a career in management with Illinois Bell, the telephone company.

Early into his career, however, he went into the Army. It was the end of the Korean War at that point, and he was an officer assigned to run the courts and boards section, where misdemeanor-type offenses were tried. He worked as a prosecutor and tried many of those cases, which “had law a little bit in the

back of my mind.”

So when he left the Army with the G.I. Bill ready to pay for more schooling, Keith signed up for law school at the University of Illinois. While there, he helped form an honor system within the law school, eliminating the need for professors to monitor tests. His argument was that the students were there to prepare to be lawyers.

By implementing the honor system, still in place there today, he felt the burden of ethical responsibility should be placed on the student where it rightfully belonged.

After law school, Keith headed into trial work, just as he had with the Army.

“That’s where the action is,” he says. “The challenge is there. There’s nothing like winning, and there’s nothing as bad as losing.”

For 18 years, Hyzer defended insurance companies, gas companies and the railroads. Among his top cases came after a natural gas explosion in the early 1970s that included numerous injuries and deaths. He defended the gas company in a 10-day jury trial that he described as the “most complex” of his career and came out with a jury verdict for less than had previously been offered.

Today, very little of Hyzer’s caseload involves trial work. Primarily, he is the general counsel for the Rockford Area Association of Realtors, which sports about 800 members. He advises the staff on its code of ethics or complaints against agents.

He drafted the primary contract used in real estate transactions for Winnebago County, a document that at one point was limited to one page and was used for everything from single-family homes to commercial deals.

“Now we have multiple documents and they are four pages,” he says. “And we fight to keep it on four pages.”

The real estate industry has changed dramatically in the 25 years since Keith began focusing on real estate law.

When he first started, there were fewer brokers and more simple transactions. Today, mega offices of realtors dominate the local landscape and buyers are depending more heavily on financing for increasingly expensive homes. There are far more regulations today than there were in the 1970s, and it all has translated into a more intimate involvement for him.

“I’ve enjoyed the relationships with the people I work with year in and year out,” he says. “Some people I’ve represented for 30 or 40 years: They’ve become friends as well as clients.”

When the Hyzers married, they had a Brady Bunch of sorts on their hands—her three boys and his three girls. The kids didn’t all live

together, but the family is clearly a top priority for the Hyzers. And to that end, they understand that maternity leaves happen and that family emergencies are going to crop up. They know that young lawyers want to strike a balance between work and family, and that 80-hour work weeks simply can’t be the norm.

“We make adjustments because we realize people do have lives outside of work,” Nancy says.

That is, in fact, the reason why Keith has held on to the same legal assistant for the past 40 years. Mereva Sholl first interviewed to work as his secretary more than four decades ago, and took the job because she was impressed at how much he was interested in her as a person—not just what she could do for him on the job.

“He genuinely cares, not only about business but everyone around him and in his life,” Sholl says. “He is a very considerate and

Foundation by serving on a committee and quickly stood out because of her work ethic and commitment to the group, says Foundation President Gloria Lundin.

“She demonstrated that she was conscientious, she cared, and she was listening and learning about the Community Foundation,” Lundin says. “It’s not enough to just do—you have to do it well. And Nancy does that.”

They Endure

As a Rockford native, Nancy brings a deep, working knowledge of the community to the table, Lundin says. That comes with both business connections and respect from other local leaders.

“She’s approachable and very likeable,” Lundin says. “She’s a kind lady.”

When they aren’t working, the Hyzers enjoy international travel, tennis and golf. Keith is



The Hyzers and one of their legal assistants, Mereva Sholl. She has worked with Keith for more than 40 years.

honorable person... If I didn’t understand something, he anticipated that a client might not understand it either, so he would make changes.”

Off the job, the Hyzers are deeply involved in volunteer efforts within the local legal community.

Both are past presidents of the Winnebago County Bar Association and have served on the real estate section of the Illinois State Bar Association. Keith has received the Judge Seely Forbes Award, and Nancy has served on the Winnebago County Crime and Public Safety Commission.

Nancy also serves on the 20-member board of the Community Foundation of Northern Illinois, a nonprofit that distributes grants to organizations in need. She started with the

quick to praise his wife’s cooking and gardening efforts. And even at the age of 79, you’ll still find Keith out running through his neighborhood before work three mornings a week.

But through it all, the practice of law is weaved through each moment of their lives. It’s core to who the Hyzers are and to the lives they have built for themselves in Rockford.

Considering his 52-year career, Keith Hyzer still remembers the words he heard during his law school orientation: “You don’t have to be bright to be a lawyer, but you have to have endurance.”

“Well,” he says now, “I’ve endured.”

With a soft smile of respect, Nancy looks to her husband, her partner, her friend.

“Yes,” she agreed. “You have.” ■