

Two-lawyer firm practices locally, thinks globally

The Daily Record (Baltimore, MD)

April 2, 2015 Thursday

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Section: NEWS

Length: 851 words

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Body

Like most small firms, Hermina Law Group in Laurel started out as a general practice firm, handling mainly contracts, business formation and technology litigation.

But in the two decades since the law firm's launch, brothers John and George Hermina have built an international law practice that now makes up about half of their business. Their main clients: the governments of Egypt and Kuwait.

The brothers' business relationship with the Egyptian government began in the early 1990s, John Hermina said. The firm was approached by a high-ranking official at the Egyptian State Lawsuits Authority who needed to find an attorney to handle a case in which the statute of limitations was about to expire.

The case involved a large shipping company that had docked improperly in Alexandria Shipyard and knocked down several cranes. Because it was a maritime law case, many attorneys didn't want to touch it, George Hermina said, but the firm was able to secure a settlement of about \$2 million for the government. One key advantage: the brothers moved to the U.S. from Egypt as teenagers, and both speak Arabic.

"We were part of a very, very small group of lawyers who spoke Arabic and could practice in a number of jurisdictions," John Hermina said. "What really helps is the language ability — we learn the case a lot more quickly, and understanding the culture helps. "

Over time, he said, they began to realize that small firms like theirs could offer benefits to foreign governments that many of the "Big Law" U.S. firms that count hundreds of attorneys among their ranks could not.

“There’s better management and care for information that you receive (at small firms], which tends to make the clients feel more comfortable, versus a situation where you might have a big firm and have five people working on the case,” John Hermina said. “At least with respect to Middle Eastern clients, they tend to be more comfortable having a smaller number of individuals and personal attention in their cases. ”

Efficiency is another bonus of a two-lawyer firm, George Hermina added. Without “committees and subcommittees or having eight attorneys argue over what course of action to take,” many of their cases are resolved within a year, which keeps clients happy, he said.

Day to day

Before attending the University of Baltimore School of Law, George Hermina earned an MBA and worked as a financial analyst. As a result, he said he handles more of the business aspects of the firm, while John handles the lion’s share of litigation work.

“We’ve been very fortunate in getting a lot of these complex, controversial cases,” George Hermina said. “We got our teeth cut on some major stuff early on, and we started narrowing our practice very quickly. ”

Other than international work, the two attorneys also frequently handle consumer class action cases and volunteer as alternative dispute resolution mediators for the Maryland District Court, they said.

Because the countries they represent are usually being sued in the U.S., most of their travel takes place here, George Hermina said. The pair have not traveled to Cairo in the past few years due to unrest in the region.

But that gives them time to help train law school students, several of whom typically work at the firm at any given time, he said.

“It’s like a little school within the school,” he said.

‘Another bite at the apple’

The strategy the firm employs in most of its cases is to get the lawsuits dismissed as early as possible on grounds of immunity under the Foreign Sovereign Immunities Act, the Herminas said.

In a case that was dismissed in the U.S. District Court for the Southern District of New York this week, John Hermina represented the Egyptian government when it was sued for \$4.8 billion.

One of the plaintiffs, Ahmed Bahgat, claimed the National Bank of Egypt and the Egyptian government threatened him with imprisonment to force him to assume personal liability for the debts of several companies he had founded. Later, he said, the government imposed a travel ban and asset freeze on him.

The case was dismissed in large part because it did not fall under any of the exceptions to the Foreign Sovereign Immunities Act. In addition, John Hermina said, it had already been fully arbitrated in Egypt.

“They said, ‘Well, we lost in Egypt — let’s see if we can take another bite at the apple,’ so they brought their case here,” he said. “For the most part, courts are very understanding of the importance of foreign relations and the importance of maintaining and respecting the sovereign immunity of foreign countries. ”

If it had moved forward, a \$4.8 billion lawsuit would have amounted to a major economic threat for a nation like Egypt, John Hermina said.

“That can make a dent on the Egyptian economy. That’s not a drop in the bucket,” he said. “After the numbers cross a particular threshold amount, it becomes very worrisome for Egypt. That’s the point at which they start to consider the case extremely serious. ”

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Load-Date: April 8, 2015

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