

# Making the system available, from health care to court

BY MARK KIND | STAFF WRITER

Norm Siegel might still be a corporate defense lawyer if he could have just gotten comfortable with the business model.

"It struck me that it was odd that you would make more money by losing a case slowly than by winning quickly," said Siegel, a founding partner in Stueve Siegel Hanson Woody LLP.

So in 2001, he and two partners created a law firm dedicated to making money primarily from successful lawsuits rather than billable hours.

Working for small businesses, consumers and employees allegedly wronged by big businesses, Siegel and his partners have tallied verdicts totaling at least \$150 million and aggressively pursued hefty settlements.

Siegel also has emerged as a civic leader at the relatively young age of 37, chairing a committee that monitors hundreds of millions of dollars set aside for health care in the Kansas City area.

As a transplanted big-city East Coast lawyer fresh out of law school in 1993, Siegel found an ideal spot to quickly sink roots into Missouri's legal and political subsoil, beginning his legal career as a bureaucrat in the state attorney general's office in Jefferson City.

Newly elected Attorney General Jay Nixon wasn't sure he wanted Siegel around because he had been hired at the tail end of William Webster's term, and Nixon wanted to clean house.

But Nixon turned Siegel loose on elected officials, including former House Speaker Bob Griffin, former Secretary of State Judi Moriarty and alleged cronies of Webster, all of whom faced federal investigations.

"Norm was a rising star from day one," Nixon said.



DAVE KAUP / KCBJ

**Norm Siegel "was a rising star from day one," says Missouri Attorney General Jay Nixon, one of Siegel's first bosses after law school.**

## Norm Siegel

**Title:** Partner, Stueve Siegel Hanson Woody LLP

**Age:** 37

**Family:** Wife, Lynnette; daughter, Sydney, 1

**Education:** Bachelor's degree, Tufts University; law degree, Washington University

Siegel's athleticism made an impression during weekly recreation breaks.

"He's just an excellent lawyer, a wonderful person and an average basketball player," Nixon said. "I think he played rugby in college. At least, that's the way he played basketball."

Siegel said his work with Nixon exposed him not only to the attorney general's high elbows but also to high-stakes litigation and "sophisticated defense counsel."

Siegel left the attorney general's office after about three years, but when Nixon asked him to serve on the Health Care Foundation of Kansas City's Community Advisory Committee in 2003, Siegel agreed.

He became chairman by a unanimous vote Aug. 11, despite being the youngest of 24 members. The committee oversees the management of \$400 million set aside from the sale of nonprofit hospitals to HCA Inc. in 2002.

Leading the committee requires a deft touch with hardworking volunteers who have strong opinions, former committee Chairman Bob Glaser said.

"Norm is able to get them back on track," Glaser said. "He's very articulate, just a very good leader. He's one of the brightest people I've met."

Siegel said the hours of unpaid committee work are "great balance, a good

counterweight to the enormous amount of work of starting a business.”

Siegel came to Kansas City in 1996, ready to take his Jefferson City experiences to a bigger city.

He spent 18 months at Blackwell Sanders Peper Martin LLP. Then Sonnenschein Nath Rosenthal LLP beckoned and threw him back into complex litigation, sending him to Michigan on an environmental case within a week.

The national firm made him its youngest partner and put him to work in Houston with Curtis Woods of Kansas City defending two antitrust cases against an insulation manufacturer and its president.

They won acquittal for the president, but the trial court and appeals courts have disagreed on the company’s guilt.

A California lawyer who knew Siegel and Patrick Stueve put the two in touch with each other in 2000 after hearing both talk about starting an entrepreneurial law firm. After drinking beer and splitting a pizza with Siegel at Da Bronx on 39th Street, Stueve said he felt like they had been friends for years.

“He has an ability to be himself, to open himself up and be very down to earth and

very direct about who he is and what he wants and mix into that a sense of humor,” Stueve said.

Stueve found that he and Siegel agreed on the entrepreneurial possibilities of working almost exclusively as plaintiff lawyers.

Siegel said Merton Hersh was the business model’s model client. Hersh owned the thriving Overland Park franchise of Robert Half International, an employment agency for accountants and bookkeepers.

“He had a business that he wanted to pass on to his daughter,” Siegel said.

But Robert Half was buying out its franchisees, and Hersh thought his business was slipping away. He asked Siegel for help in 2003.

“Within a very short time, he had a strong grasp of our business and what we were trying to accomplish with this legal action,” Hersh said.

A few months ago, Hersh and his daughter, Michelle, opened Overland Park-based Interview Staffing after waiting out a noncompete with Robert Half. Hersh said he’s pleased with the new start that followed the confidential settlement Stueve and Siegel extracted from Robert Half.

“They were tenacious. They were thorough,” Hersh said. “Because of their skill and pressure and thoroughness, they caused the other side to change law firms midstream.”

Siegel’s latest victory came in August, when he and partner George Hanson obtained a \$26 million jury verdict in independence for five State Farm agents who had accused State Farm of terminating their agreements after they had publicly criticized the company.

“He just did a first-rate job in analysis of the issues and framing of the issues,” said Clifford Lykke of Houston, one of the former agents. “We had thousands of documents, years of history, all of that, to be reduced to something that could fit on a bumper sticker.”

Lykke said Siegel’s skills and the firm’s willingness to risk hours of unpaid work put him and the other agents on equal footing with a multimillion-dollar company capable of overpowering most opponents.

“They just are so strong you can be just trampled,” he said. “Norm made the system available to us.”

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