

LAUREN ELLIOTT

emerging lawyer

Old-School Pillars Buttress Tech-Savvy Enthusiasm, Skill

by Chris Bailey

DES PLAINES—She blows through the door, running late. But any irritation at her slight tardiness immediately disappears as Lauren C. Elliott's energy, enthusiasm and immediate concentration fill the room.

Elliott is of her own time in that she applies modern technology, relentless research and a personal touch to an arcane area of the law growing more important in Illinois' current economy. But the pillars buttressing her life—the importance of family ties, friends and hard work—come from old-school values transmitted through her Greek family heritage.

All of which goes a long way toward explaining how she works for Elliott & Associates Attorneys in Des Plaines, a firm started by her parents, Michael and Joanne, and one she is likely to run herself one day.

The firm deals almost exclusively in real estate tax law—basically working toward lower tax bills for clients in an increasingly confiscatory state. They represent property owners before the Cook County Assessor, Cook County Board of Review and the Property Tax Appeal Board. Their attorneys have more than 90 years of combined experience in the property tax field and have saved their clients more than \$280 million tax dollars via appeals.

Not so surprisingly, Elliott never really anticipated such a family-style partnership in her youth.

“My parents didn't encourage me toward the law,” says Elliott. “In fact, they actively discouraged it. They wanted to make sure it was what I wanted to do, not what I thought they would want.”

But she found she wanted to work in the law, graduating from Indiana University's Kelley School of Business in Bloomington with undergraduate degrees in business economics and public policy. She received her law degree from Chicago-Kent College of Law. Her studies turned out to be exactly what she would need in her current position, though she still had no real thought of joining her parents' firm when she began practicing law.

Elliott clerked with the law firm of Powers Rogers & Smith in Chicago, where she



represented personal injury plaintiffs. She later defended medical malpractice, premises liability and product liability clients with Hinshaw & Culbertson in Chicago.

Five years after entering the law, Elliott found herself looking at her future with questions about her next move. Enter Dad, who, as dads sometimes do, quietly offered a suggestion, one he had probably dreamed of without much faith it would happen.

“You could always come and work with us,” he told her. She hadn't been waiting for the invitation.

“I never thought I'd want to join my parents,” she says. “I never wanted to do real estate taxes. And I loved the courtroom.”

But join them she did, and that meant doing real estate tax work. And she soon learned her courtroom skills worked just as well before a tax appeal board as they did before a judge or jury.

“It offered me a way to make an impact and to direct a team,” she says. “It's not always easy, working with your mom and dad. We all have the same independent personality. We all are headstrong. Being a follower is not natural to me. That's not fun, and it can be stressful. But I know I can learn from others.”

Those are the minuses, not the pluses. “The beauty of it is that I can totally trust my family,” she says. “We all want the same outcome.”

OPPOSING THE GOVERNMENT

By its very nature, the work she does is always in opposition to the government.

Governments tax, and her clients are expected to pay. But she sees and works at illuminating the disparities between the bill presented and the bill that actually is due.

“It's the government's job to mass appraise,” says Elliott. “And it's our job to pursue the details and distinctions to avoid our clients finding themselves at a huge competitive advantage.”

Some of her favorite work involves hoteliers and owner-occupied industrial firms, though she also serves retail strip owners and mom-and-pop businesses. Her focus area includes the city of Chicago and the north and south suburbs.

One example of where she enters the legal fray involves the purchase price of a hotel, which can cause a good deal of tax trouble and put that hotel at a significant economic disadvantage.

“The purchase price includes lots of items that provide value, but aren't taxable,” she says. “That's where the lawyering comes in.”

For hotels specifically, the value of a trained and assessable workforce, the value of the hotel flag, the value of a booking system, and other tangible items like furniture are often included in a bulk purchase price. But they are not taxable as part of the real estate in Illinois.

One of her clients owned a building that was vacant but it wasn't taxed that way. This amounts to a significant difference in terms of tax law that can reduce the tax bill by approximately 60 percent. That same property owner was planning to create a mixed-use development but was unaware that if it was done in a certain way it could reap tax benefits.

“I advised them to call me once redevelopment plans are underway so that we can confirm that the improvement would fall into the mixed-class classification, reducing their taxes from a 25 to 10 percent assessment ratio,” says Elliott. “That typically translates to a 60 percent tax savings year after year.”

Elliott says various tax incentives often are used by the government to get a desired result. But they are not readily known.

“Renovation might be the goal,” says Elliott, of a difficult property. “Or they might use an incentive to promote development in an area without much appeal—a property on the Cook County border, for example, where taxes are lower in the other county across the street.”

Her job, she says, is to know about those various incentives, convey that information to clients and make sure they understand the appeal process and know what to expect.

And, she says, there are a lot more people interested in the details of their tax bills since the 2008 economic downturn and the upturn in the Illinois government body tax increases.

“As taxes go up, there’s a lot more tension around real estate taxes,” says Elliott. “Many clients are a lot more involved now, feeling like they should be managing and checking all the time. Before, they weren’t quite as diligent. We’re also getting more prospects coming to us, asking for second opinions.”

That uptick in interest in their tax bills has also helped provide Elliott with another area of interest — competition in the field.

“When the recession hit, real estate took a tumble,” says Cheryl Axley, who attended law school with Elliott’s parents and has known Lauren Elliott her entire life. “People couldn’t afford a home, and there was little or no estate planning or business planning. People were not getting divorced because they couldn’t afford it.”

Axley, an attorney, former state senator and now a lobbyist, says a lot of attorneys working in those areas migrated to areas of the law that were still active and growing, including real estate tax law.

“It became very competitive, with specialty shops and others doing the work on a contingency basis,” says Axley. “But Lauren was very competitive with it. She thoroughly researches each property as a unique, individual complaint, and as a result, is a forceful competitor in tax hearings. You might expect a younger person to want flashier areas of law, but she likes the competition and really gets her teeth into each case.

“She’s unique in the way she follows through with clients. She follows through on a personal level, and that’s what clients love about her.

Others can feel like they are on a conveyor belt, where they might get a form letter.”

LOVING WHAT YOU DO

Axley says she, too, was a little surprised by Elliott joining her parents’ firm.

“She interned with a big personal injury firm, so I thought maybe she wanted to be a litigator,” says Axley. “But she’s happy. Her advocacy is exceptional, and you can’t do that—have laser focus—if you don’t love it.”

Axley also pointed to Elliott’s tight family connections and outside interests as a big plus.

“Outside interests make you a better lawyer,

“**If she says she’ll do something, she does it. She knows the business and is universally liked and respected.**”

one who can better identify with clients,” says Axley, who adds that she hopes Elliott might pursue political office one day.

Peter Birnbaum, president of Attorneys’ Title Guaranty Fund, Inc., headquartered in Chicago, entered Lauren Elliott’s life very early.

“I met her the day she was born,” says Birnbaum. “Her mom was COO of our company back in the day, and I saw her in the hospital.” Which might explain his feelings of attachment.

“Lauren is really extraordinary, but maybe I’m a little biased,” says Birnbaum, who encouraged her as she started law school. “She’s extremely bright and extremely dedicated. She clerked for a friend of mine and my friend couldn’t say enough about her ability and work ethic.”

He, too, thought she might remain in the courtroom as a litigator.

“She was so gifted as a trial lawyer, I was a little surprised,” he says. But he wasn’t shocked.

“Not to make this ethnic, but they are a traditional Greek family. They are very, very close. I think she wanted to help build the business her parents started.”

And, he says, her skills were probably welcome.

“She’s very tech-savvy,” says Birnbaum. “And she has the opportunity to use her courtroom skills in the tax appeal process. Those processes are going to become more complex in the ensuing years, especially in Illinois. Because of daunting financial problems at the local, county and state level, real estate taxes are going to be a very big deal.”

Mauro Glorioso, executive director of the Illinois Property Tax Appeal Board, has known Elliott through their real estate tax assessment work for about seven years, though he has known her parents far longer.

“This business can be adversarial, but I always love talking to her,” says Glorioso. “She does not waste time on conflict but does her job and does it

very professionally. She’s a special person with a great attitude.

“She’s timely, and if she says she’ll do something, she does it. She knows the business and is universally liked and respected. She’s very tech-savvy. She understands the tech side better than most. She can handle a lot of work all at once, and she’s always positive.”

And he sees a bright future for her and her family’s firm.

“I think maybe she’ll be taking over the family business soon,” says Glorioso. “I think she’s got the head on her shoulders to handle that.”

John Chwarzynski, with Hale & Monico in Chicago, met Elliott through a cousin while in high school.

“I would trust her in anything,” he says. “And she’s the first person I’d send a client who needs tax help to. She’s one of the best in the



Back, from left: sister Danielle Elliott, Elliott; front, from left: mother Joanne Elliott, father Michael Elliott

tax law industry, she's very personable with clients, and she develops great relationships. I have never heard an opposition lawyer complain about her."

Beyond that, he says she has something else that's hard to define.

"She's very, very good in the courtroom," he says. "She has a charisma about her that you don't see in most lawyers. She's also very detail-oriented and always prepared."

TRUSTWORTHY, LOYAL FRIEND

As much as Chwarzynski admires her professional accomplishments, though, he especially appreciates her as a friend.

"She'll always be there for you," he says. "She makes time for her friends, and she gives great advice. I would trust her with anything."

Anastasia Palivos, a member of the Illinois Pollution Control Board, met Elliott at Greek

Orthodox Church Camp two decades ago, and they remain firm friends.

"I see her every week because we live a street away from one another. Growing up, her family and mine became close," says Palivos. "But we went to different middle schools and high schools, different colleges, and entered different fields of law.

"We stayed friends through it all, and she's going to be my maid of honor at my wedding in Greece next summer. She's a very loyal friend. She's very independent and confident. She's very personable and can talk to anyone. You can depend on her."

Elliott's ties to friends and family are well-known. She's happy that her younger brother, Louis, is back home from a lengthy London consultancy, despite his bravado.

"He thinks he's the smartest," says Elliott, rolling her eyes as only a big sister can. "But he

might be right."

Besides her parents, she works daily with her older sister, Danielle Elliott, who is not an attorney but is chief operating and financial officer of the family firm. Danielle is also expecting a child with husband Bill Brandt.

Lauren Elliott is looking forward to becoming an aunt and sounds a bit wistful when saying she wants that for herself someday. Though not married, she has a significant other.

"She's bringing him to Greece, so that's a good sign," says Palivos. Only a long-time friend can get away with that sort of speculation.

Until then, though, Elliott seems content to play the aunt, sister, daughter and friend.

If you want to catch her alone, though, you'll probably have to make an appointment or get up very early in the day.

She'll be doing yoga at 5 a.m. "That's my 'me' time," she says. ■