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Good Counsel

Attorneys at estate planning firm Weinstock Manion take great satisfaction from helping others.

By Shane Nelson

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Litigator Blake A. Rummel has a straightforward description for the work she does at Weinstock Manion. “I just fight over dead people’s money,” she said, laughing.

Rummel joined the estate planning boutique a little over two decades ago after several years prosecuting child abuse cases for the Los Angeles County Counsel’s office, where she often represented social workers at the Department of Children and Family Services.

“I needed out,” she recalled, chuckling again. “It was a challenging job, ... but I got a lot of trial experience.”

Rummel started handling litigation on a contract basis for Weinstock Manion but soon found estate and trust law appealed to her. A firm shareholder today, Rummel works strictly on litigation matters for the 20-lawyer shop in Los Angeles, allowing other Weinstock Manion attorneys to specialize solely on estate planning and administration work.

“If I am a planner but I’m also litigating half the time, I’m not devoting 100 percent of my attention and knowledge base to either,” said Jonathan S. Forster, a firm shareholder who often works with clients



Photo courtesy of Raffi Alexander.

Front row, from left to right: Robert E. Strauss, Maggie Mouradian, Jeffrey P. Geida, Sussan H. Shore, Gary M. Borofsky Second row, from left to right: Martin A. Neumann, Blake A. Rummel, Neil Solarz, Jessica G. Babrick, Jonathan S. Forster, Elizabeth G. Acevedo.

who own businesses or real estate interests.

“The fact that I can be a full-time planner and we can have full-time litigators as well allows us all to really focus on our specialties,” he said.

Weinstock Manion leadership recruited Forster 18 years ago, looking to add the long-time transactional attorney to assist with the firm’s business succession and wealth transfer planning workload. Prior to joining the firm, Forster was general counsel for a software company and spent years in M&A. Like Rummel, though, he was looking for a change.

“You work really hard, and you get a deal done, and then the client sells the business and rides off into the sunset, and we don’t hear from that client again,” Forster said of working in M&A. “You don’t get to see how that client’s life has continued and how this sale has impacted them. One of the things that really drew me to estate planning is the long term relationship with clients.”

Sussan H. Shore, who’s been handling estate and trust planning and administration at Weinstock Manion for 40 years, works with a number

of clients today whose families have been represented for three generations by the firm. A shareholder and the firm’s managing director, Shore said good estate planning attorneys truly are counselors of law, and much of her work requires substantial trust.

“People have to be able to talk to you and be honest with you and maybe be honest about things they wouldn’t discuss with anyone outside of their immediate family or their therapist,” Shore explained.

“There are so often times when I work with my clients and walk out of a meeting and

in my head say, ‘Well, that was about 75% psychology today and about 25% law,’” she added. “And I like that. I like that I can earn people’s trust. That’s very important to me. I like that they consider me good counsel.”

Shore said Weinstock Manion, founded in 1959, already had a terrific reputation in the estate planning world when she joined the firm in 1980. Firm founder Harold Weinstock taught estate planning at UCLA Extension for 25 years, according to Shore, and wrote a book entitled “Planning an Estate: A Guidebook of Principles and Techniques” that served for years as the go-to text for those looking to learn the area of practice.

“Anybody who did estate planning had it on their bookshelves,” said Shore, who in turn taught estate planning for 30 years at UCLA. “Hal already had national recognition back then, and that attracted me to the firm.”

Shore said the firm did tackle some family law work for a time before she joined, but it has strictly handled estate planning issues since.

“Everyone working at our firm is a specialist,” she said. “From the associates to the paralegals and ultimately to the partners, we’re all prac-

ticing together because we all love this area of the law.”

Los Angeles litigator Scott E. Rahn, who has opposed Weinstock Manion on many probate and estate matters, described the boutique as “one of the most respected estate firms in the city.”

“Any lawyer worth their metal is going to be happy to see someone like Weinstock on the other side of the case,” he said. “You know you’re going to be able to move the case forward, agree on what the law is, agree on what the key facts are, and while you may agree to disagree on things, you know they know what the processes are for having those disagreements addressed efficiently and cost effectively, so you can put the case to bed sooner and for less legal spend, which is what clients want.”

Los Angeles M&A attorney Jeffrey A. Sklar, who works often with Weinstock Manion, said the firm has no trouble meeting the needs of a wide range of clients.

“They’re really a sophisticated law firm, working on the highest-end trust and estate matters,” Sklar said. “But they’re also accessible and able to work with more conventional families and clients who are maybe not ultra high

net worth and don’t necessarily require that level of horsepower. They scale well.”

Sklar has teamed regularly with Forster in the past to assist clients selling businesses, and he said it’s important to involve the Weinstock Manion shareholder early.

“Jonathan is really one of the best trust and estate lawyers out there,” Sklar said. “Working with him before you’re on the eve of the transaction allows that client to do planning – estate planning, other sorts of tax planning – that if put in place can be very beneficial to them and to succeeding generations in their family.”

Los Angeles estate and trust attorney Vicki F. Magasinn, who has been referring clients in need of an estate litigator to Rummel for more than 15 years, hired the Weinstock Manion attorney to represent her a couple years ago in a trustee administration matter in which litigation was threatened.

“Blake just squelched the litigation. Nothing ever happened because they were scared of her,” Magasinn said. “So I really felt I was personally in good hands with her.”

Rummel has in recent weeks been learning the ropes of virtual hearings before the Los Angeles County Superior

Court, which reopened its probate division in late June. Describing the video appearance process as “a little frustrating,” it didn’t take the litigator long to admit: “I miss court.”

“As a trial attorney, not having the ability to have trials is frankly quite traumatizing for all of us,” Rummel said, laughing again.

Shore conceded, meanwhile, that not meeting face to face with clients during the pandemic has been a substantial change to her planning work, but like Rummel, she’s adjusting.

“It’s important to get a feel for what they’re smiling about. What they’re frowning about,” she said of clients. “But Zoom has been a decent substitute for that.”

Each Weinstock Manion attorney interviewed said, for the most part, their estate work remains unchanged. And whether it’s litigating remotely, planning over Zoom or administering an estate after the passing of a client’s loved one, helping people is a constant.

“I often encounter clients at what is one of the lowest times of their lives,” Shore said. “And assuring them I can help and my staff can help and we will assist them throughout that process to make things easier is very gratifying.”