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Family Ties

Two brothers, one son, and a cousin work together at Appel Law Firm on plaintiffs' lawsuits.

By Banks Albach
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WALNUT CREEK — Family ties are a point of pride at Appel Law Firm LLP, a plaintiffs' law firm specializing in personal injury.

Launched by brothers Joseph J. Appel and Michael J. Appel in 1995, they now have Joseph's son Thomas G. Appel in rank along with his cousin Joseph L.J. Appel, both attorneys.

The four are a meeting of minds with the gritty legal wrangling of the past and today's posture toward mediation, along with the importance of an online presence. All have defense experience under their belt, but have since crossed the aisle.

Michael Appel, the older brother, joined Hauerken, St. Clair, Zappetini & Hines in San Francisco out of Golden Gate University School of Law in 1973. One of his first cases was a premises liability case defending Goodwill Industries.

"When I first started, we tried cases," Michael Appel said. "The partners would sit down on Friday afternoon and discuss the five cases they had scheduled for trial Monday afternoon."

He was on the cusp of partnership, a five-year track at the time, when he defended a case and was approached by his adversary who offered him a job. He took the position.

"I found out that I like throwing the rocks better than dodging them," Michael Appel said. "My psychological makeup is better suited for that."

Joseph J. Appel also started in defense at Ropers Majeski Kohn Bentley PC and later worked together for attorney Stanley J. Bell in San Francisco. He said having defense experience as a plaintiff's attorney is a special weapon.

"Then you know what buttons to push," Joseph J. Appel said.

The firm's experience is in construction law, but it also handles other



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The Appel litigation family, from left, Joseph L.J. Appel, Thomas G. Appel, Joseph J. Appel and Michael J. Appel

legal matters, such as auto accidents, premises liability, elder abuse, worker compensation and wrongful death. It doesn't handle defense cases and bills on contingency.

The founding Appel partners see themselves as a line of last defense for people in medical quagmire, many of them facing tough legal defense from insurance companies.

Trials and verdicts are rare today in the cases in which the Appel firm specializes. The attorneys spend most of their time in mediation.

Chris P. Lavdiotis, a mediator and arbitrator in Oakland who works across the Bay Area, has handled several cases with Appel.

"I can vouch for the integrity and professionalism of the Appel Law Firm," Lavdiotis wrote in an email. "This is a conscientious group of attorneys who are able, very well-organized and thorough in their prepa-

ration. I would never hesitate to refer someone to them."

The firm landed a \$1.3 million verdict in Alameda County Superior Court in August on behalf of Dustin L. Hansen, who fell through faulty scaffolding, *Hansen v. East Bay Floor Covering Inc.*, RG 15765238 (Alameda Super. Ct., filed April 6, 2015).

Hansen said he was carrying close to 20 pounds in tools when he slipped through the unmarked six-inch hole in the scaffolding that was drilled by a subcontractor and covered by another.

The plaintiff said he suffered injuries to his back, neck and shoulder.

"I've never been through anything like this, just being a man and working," Hansen said. "Going through this, I couldn't have asked for anything better. Appel was straight to the point and did a lot of hard work."

Five years ago, Thomas, Joseph's son, joined the firm. He'd been a

summer associate at a larger firm and then joined his dad after graduating from the University of San Francisco School of Law. Thomas now calls the firm his legal home.

"It's pretty unique," he said. "I feel lucky to be able to spend as much time with my dad and my uncle as possible. They have a wealth of knowledge in personal injury, so being able to learn from them, I don't feel like I have to go do other things."

His cousin Joseph L.J. Appel, the son of the founders' brother, retired Alameda County Superior Court Judge Lawrence John Appel, joined the firm recently after handling defense work for five years.

Joseph L.J. Appel said the plaintiffs' pursuit better suits his legal ambitions.

"I'm outgoing," he said. "I like to interact with people. Tom's like my brother and I love working with my uncles, so it really was a no-brainer."