

Ron Grais and Son Adam of Sugar Felsenthal Grais & Hammer



By Dan Rafter

Ronald B. Grais has achieved what he says is the ultimate dream of any attorney who has a lawyer for a son or daughter: He's now working for that child.

Grais, a veteran Chicago real estate attorney, earlier this year took a position as counsel with Chicago's **Sugar Felsenthal Grais & Hammer LLP**. You'll notice the "Grais" in that law firm's name. That's Adam J. Grais, Ron's son, the firm's managing partner.

While it's not unusual for daughters and sons to one day take positions at the law firms where their parents work, it's a rarer event for this to happen in the other direction. But so far, both Adam and Ron report the move has been a good one. As Ron says, "I'm walking around all day with a smile on my face."

And Adam, too, has found many benefits from having his father in the same law firm.

"It's been nice to see his face every day," Adam says. "I became a managing partner three years ago. It's nice to have my father around to bounce ideas off of. He's managed other firms during his career, so I can take advantage of his experience. He's dealt with all of the things at some point in his career that I have to deal with

now."

This doesn't mean, though, that Adam necessarily takes all of his father's advice. As Ron says, there is one key lesson that Adam never did learn:

"I would have thought that the one thing Adam learned from me and from my own experience as a managing partner would be that he didn't want to become one," Ron says. "Apparently, he missed that part of the message."

A Winding Path to the Law

Here's one of the more interesting parts of this story: Neither Adam nor Ron ever thought they'd be lawyers.

Ron in 1965 went to law school immediately after earning his bachelor's degree at Cornell University. But Ron only enrolled at the University of Chicago Law School because he didn't think he'd get a good enough education at the business schools of the time.

His goal was to graduate from law school, take the knowledge he gained there and use it to succeed in the business world.

But that plan changed when Ron during his law school days began working at local law firms. To his surprise, he found that he actually enjoyed the work.

"Then I figured, as long as I

went to the trouble of getting a law degree, I might as well pass the bar," Ron says. "And once I passed the bar, I figured I ought to spend some time practicing law."

That "some time" turned into a career of more than 40 years and a reputation as one of the city's top real estate lawyers.

Adam, one of the city's top tax attorneys, took a similarly circuitous path to the law. After earning his bachelor's degree from Columbia University, he "wanted to do anything but law school."

And Adam took the "anything but" part seriously, growing his hair long, moving to California and playing drums in a variety of rock bands for whatever money he could earn. He also taught music to supplement his earnings.

"My dad was already a lawyer. Becoming a lawyer, too, would have been too easy," Adam says. "I figured there had to be something different in life to try out. I was a young college graduate and figured it would be a great time in my life to explore something different."

The decision to pursue a career in music didn't bother Ron. When Adam went through his Bar Mitzvah ceremony at 13, Ron told him that he had no obligation to pursue any particular career. And Ron meant this. Ron himself was expected to enter a profession after college. As he says, he couldn't stand the sight of blood and he couldn't write small enough to fit numbers into tiny boxes. That eliminated both medicine and accounting.

That eventually left the law, a career that has turned out to be the perfect fit for Ron

and his skills.

Adam eventually returned to Chicago after his stint in California and took a number of jobs, including one as a clerk for an attorney. Like his father before him, he discovered he actually liked the job. Inspired by this, Adam enrolled in law school, earning his law degree from the University of Chicago School of Law.

Best of all? Adam didn't have to throw away all that he had learned as a musician.

"I went from using one side of my brain as a musician to the other side as a lawyer. But the experiences I gained as a musician helped me," he says. "I learned how to handle anything that was thrown at me — both literally and figuratively. That has stood me well when having to deal with issues in the law, where you never are sure what you are going to get. Nothing is too simple and straightforward."

Ron isn't surprised that Adam has built a thriving legal career. His son always had the skills necessary to succeed in law, he says.

"His generation in our family was free of any obligations. We didn't try to steer them toward any particular career," Ron says. "Given that, I am surprised that he came back to law. But I knew he had the kind of mind that would succeed in this field. He's always been very analytical. He has always had the ability to solve problems. I'm not surprised that he is good at it. I'm surprised that he gave it a try."

Eventually Making the Move

Getting to Sugar Felsenthal Grais & Hammer, and working with his son, wasn't a quick journey for Ron.

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Ron has worked for some of the most-respected law firms in the city, making managing partner status at the former Schwartz Cooper firm and crafting a long career at Jenner & Block, where he focused on real estate law. Ron also ran his own real estate company and worked as a real estate developer for 10 years.

That's a varied career already. But Ron has also focused intensively on pro-bono work. Last year, he took time off to enroll in Harvard University's Advanced Leadership Initiative. This collaboration of faculty at the famed university prepares experienced leaders — such as Ron — to take on new challenges in the social sector. The goal is turn these leaders into agents of change, giving them the tools they need to make an even greater impact on society than they did during their careers.

Ron's goal now is to do more work for non-profit agencies and charities. Bolstered by his real estate background, he is working to help organizations provide more affordable housing throughout the Chicago area.

"I came back from Harvard wanting to spend more time in socially beneficial activities," Ron says. "I wanted to immerse myself more fully in affordable-housing work. Those are things that can be difficult to do at a larger firm. The opportunity to work at Sugar Felsenthal Grais & Hammer gives me the chance to do some of this more socially aware work."

Here's a key point: Ron didn't sign up at SFGH on his own. Adam first asked him to join the firm as a counsel.

"I needed a friendly place to do the non-profit work I am interested in," Ron says. "And

Adam suggested his firm. It seemed like a good fit."

"I thought he'd bring a lot of great experience and relationships," Adam says. "And my mother wouldn't let him say 'no.'"

Of course, Adam's own legal career didn't immediately start with SFGH, either. Instead, he began at Sonnenschein Nath & Rosenthal and eventually moved to the tax department at Skadden, Arps, Slate, Meagher & Flom.

After Adam's oldest daughter was born, he decided it was time to move on. He went to work in-house for Chicago's Pritzker family.

"In that role, I took on whatever came across my desk," Adam says. "The experience of being a musician came in handy again. I figured things out as I went along."

After six years with the Pritzkers, Adam moved back to private practice while continuing to work with the family.

This time Adam wanted to work at a firm that would allow him to take on several different types of work. He didn't want to be pigeon-holed into one niche, something that can happen at larger firms. And that led him to SFGH, where he has steadily risen through the ranks to become the managing partner. Adam has now been at the firm for more than 10 years and has no regrets.

Even with these added responsibilities, Adam still finds time for music. He continues playing the drums, and he played for six years with the Chicago Bar Association's Barristers Big Band. Today, Adam plays in a local rock band. Earlier this year, this band played at Chicago's Double Door concert hall and nightclub for the Lawyers Rock 2015 benefit by the Illi-

nois Bar Foundation.

Adam even played at the grand-opening ceremony of the Turtle Factory building, a loft development at 175 N. Franklin St. in Chicago's Loop neighborhood that Ron re-developed back in 1982. Adam was just in high school, then, but it's an event Ron hasn't forgotten.

"I think he tucked us as far back in the corner as you could," Adam says. "That was a high-school rock band, after all."

In contrast to his son, Ron had worked at SFGH for less than two months at the time of this interview. But Ron, too, has no regrets about joining the firm.

"We have had a good time working through complicated issues together," Ron says. "Having the opportunity to involve my son and his partners in my practice has really been a pleasure. It means that I can continue to practice law and work with really smart people. Working with those smart people makes it all more fun."

Having an Influence and Being Influenced

Though Adam spent time as a musician, he does say that, in retrospect, his legal career began when he was born during his father's final year of law school. He was introduced to law as a child and would make the occasional visit to his father's office to help with filing paperwork.

He'd often earn a quarter during those filing sessions, which he'd spend on comic books.

Adam heard plenty of legal talk, too, around the kitchen table as he was growing up. This all had an impact, even if Adam initially resisted the idea of entering the field of

law.

"There was always plenty of conversation about the law at home," Adam says. "It was easy to soak all that up. I knew what my dad did for a living and it did seem like an interesting career. I just had to take my time to discover that it would be the right career for me, too."

Adam also adopted one of his father's more inspired workplace quirks: Ron always worked from a standing — instead of a traditional sitting — desk. Adam has done the same thing. It's a way to keep in better shape during those long days at the office.

"I can picture my dad's different offices, and my father always had a standing desk," Adam says. "He had the hipster desk before it was hip. In fact, there are quite a few attorneys in our office who have adopted the standing desk, too. It's become quite the trend here."

Adam says that working at the same firm as his father has come with plenty of benefits, not the least of which is giving his children the opportunity to see not only their father at work but their grandfather, too.

"When my daughters visit me at the office, they just have to walk down the hall and there he is," Adam says.

There was one problem — since resolved — with this arrangement: Adam could not figure out whether to refer to Ron as "Ron" or "his father" when speaking to others at the office. It didn't take long, though, for Adam to go with the latter.

"Everyone was always saying 'my father did that' or 'my father said this,'" Adam says. "It became clear right away that I wasn't going to be able to refer to him as 'Ron' to any of my co-workers."