

THE WORK D STOP



DON'T STOP AT THE OFFICE

Antonia and Andy Hays handle other relatives' matters while managing their own business, kids

By John McNally



We came together and said 'Ok, it's time to put all our eggs in this basket.'"

This is what Antonia Hays remembers telling her husband, Andy, in 2010 as they were ready to join forces to enhance her husband's burgeoning probate firm – The Hays Firm. In the 12 years, since the pair have completed their family of kids and are ready to steer the firm into a new phase – expansion.

"It was cool to be doing our own thing," Antonia said. "That was always in the cards for us."

The two knew each other throughout their undergraduate studies at Loyola University Chicago, but did not start dating until after they re-connected at a mutual friend's wedding, eventually leading to marriage in 2002. After graduating IIT Chicago-Kent College of Law in April 2008, Andy chased down his dream of own his own business – one that didn't necessarily mean opening a law firm – with the launch of the firm.

Antonia earned her J.D. from Loyola University Chicago School of Law in 2001. After spending the start of her career at a mid-size firm, and after the birth of the couple's third child (adding their fourth not long after), the couple felt it was the perfect time go all in as work and live partners. Currently, the Hays Firm has Andy (firm principal), Antonia (partner), Sarah Buck (attorney) and Jaime Nolan (paralegal). Antonia says she's leading the search to bring in new talent soon.

"We're currently in a place of growth. We're looking to hire someone and probably someone else," she said. "That's changing my role in the firm. I'm really taking a look at who we are culturally, what we are looking for in people to bring in. That's a different place for us. (Buck) has been with us for eight years. (Nolan) has been with us for 10 years. This is the first time that we're growing. You just have to be flexible and nimble."

SHARED CHAOS

Andy and Antonia's shared Google calendar may look more like a colorful Jackson Pollock painting, but after more than a decade of working together they can see the constant in the chaos. "I feel like we meet daily on this topic," Antonia said. "It's constant communication."



Andy believes that with everything going on from court calls, client meetings and travel to the kids' activities, the chance for work stress to bleed into the home is not possible.

"We have so much going on at home...I know we don't sit around talking about our cases all night long," he said. "We don't have any more problems than anyone would have with work bleeding into the family life."

Antonia sees it differently: "It is all interwoven. It is a lot of face time. I don't see the home life as separate from the work life. The reason we're do the work life is for the home life...for the lifestyle, for the kids. It's not always easy, it's challenging. You have to be mindful about where you're at when you talk to one another. But, we get the job done. At home and in the office."

IN THE RIGHT FIELD

Working in the probate arena provides the Hays Law Firm structure a unique approach to handling matters between arguing family members. Antonia recalls a recent client that needed an extra call between her and Andy together for their benefit.

"We are not representing big corporations or insurance firms, we are presenting people. There is a connection in that and there's a humanness to the work. Considering our structure I think that really helps when we deal with clients," Antonia said. "These are family situations – between siblings – and they are volatile. They can be deep and dark. Having a family-focused life inside and outside the firm ... helps us to navigate with clients."

Andy says the estates and trusts the firm handles mirror their own small business. Bad feelings from years of family resentment are the barriers they have to break through to find a solution.

"The difficult job is to see the other side and attempt to get the parties to see the situation, analyze it and strip out the emotion to whatever degree is possible," he said. "When I'm most proud is when I can get a client or a completely inflamed situation.... when I can bring them to a settlement."

The Hays believe their success can be duplicated, but couples who constantly stress out over the grinding work will face an uphill battle.

"Don't take yourselves too seriously," Antonia said. "It's insane what we are doing. But it's exciting, fun and never predictable. If you just want to live by the seat of your pants this is what you should do."

Andy adds: "If you want to fight with your spouse, you don't need to own a business to fight with them. There's plenty of other stuff in your lives for that. Having that upside of owning the business, that's worth the risk."



Andy and Antonia Hays with their four children: Daughters (from left) Mila and Jelana and sons Tomo and Paul.