

Being Better

Burned out and searching for answers, Martin Levin leaves powerful practice for divinity school

BY KATHY FLEMING



As Martin Levin (JD 88) and his dad Fred (JD 61) left the courthouse in June 2000, there was cause for celebration. They had just prevailed in a \$32 million medical malpractice suit.

But there was no joy for the younger trial lawyer. It was just his latest win in a long line of over-the-top victories that brought yet more money and more prestige.

“He had come to hate the practice of law,” said his father, who worked next to his son, in and out of the courtroom, seven days a week for 12 years. “I was really worried about him.”

Despite being one of the most successful attorneys in the nation — a savvy strategist named one of the “Top Ten Litigators in 1999” by *The National Law Journal* — Fred Levin did not expect what came next.

Martin, at the age of 36, announced he was leaving his multi-million dollar annual salary and the law firm to attend Harvard Divinity School.

He was departing at the top of his game. He was president of the Levin Papantonio law firm in Pensacola, a firm created in 1955 by his uncle, David Levin (JD 52), and former Florida governor Reubin Askew (JD 56). He had received 15 jury verdicts in excess of \$1 million and five in excess of \$20 million. He was on course to become president of the Academy of Florida Trial Lawyers Association.

Bob Kerrigan, a Pensacola attorney who often works with and against the Levins, says Martin was a competitor who has “gone up against some of the best attorneys in the nation and whipped them all.”

“Few lawyers in my experience have had the ability to have an immediate grasp of complicated legal issues with the ease that Martin does,” Kerrigan said. “He is one fine human being as well.”

For Martin, it was both easy and hard.

“I was born into a fortunate situation. I never wanted for anything,” Martin said, ever soft-spoken and reflective. “But I made a decision early on that I was going to stand on my own. I wasn’t the most intelligent guy in the room, so that meant I had to study seven days a week when I was in college. Once I started practicing law, I prepared literally 365 days a year, even on Christmas, to compete at a high level.”

That work ethic led to Martin graduating with top honors in economics at Stanford University, and in the number one spot of his UF law school class. He was editor of the *Florida Law Review* and clerked in the United States District Court. Twenty of his legal writings, and a book on closing arguments, have been published. He designed and developed SmartJURY, a software program available commercially.

“I woke up at 36 and said, ‘I’ve accomplished everything I’ve dreamed of. I don’t need or want any more money.’ I don’t want to get caught in the economic trap of greed, dishonesty or manipulation. It’s not the proper goal for me,” he said.

Instead he wanted answers. And he started to change.

“I wanted to wake up one morning with an epiphany and a sense of peace. It wasn’t happening. I kept asking myself those hard questions that everyone at some point asks. Why am I here? What is my purpose? What is expected of me?” he said.

Martin grew up in a Jewish household. His wife Terri, who he met at UF, grew up Catholic. Together they began to explore area synagogues and churches of different denominations. He started spending hours at Sacred Heart Children’s Hospital, regularly visiting terminally ill children and their families. Known for his ability to

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party as hard as he worked, he no longer found either pleasurable.

Terri suggested he take some religion courses at a nearby community college. With his usual methodical attention to research and planning, he decided Harvard Divinity School was the best fit for his needs. He and Terri moved to Boston in 2001, bought a house next to the school, and he started classes on September 11, the very day of the terrorists attacks and a time when millions were looking inward.

It wasn't that Martin wanted to become a rabbi or a priest; he just wanted to know how to become a better person.

"I didn't know what to think when he made this decision. It was a shock," said his father, describing his son's decision as a big blow to him and to the firm. Martin was not only the president of the firm, he was one of its top three money producers.

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Martin, who often speaks about the good his father has accomplished through his legal practice, calls his father his best friend.

"Dad was great about everything," said Martin. "He would call me every day in Boston and ask me what I learned in class that day."

For three years Martin studied the religions of the world as he earned his masters in theology. Again he excelled, graduating with an A average.

"Looking back almost two years later, I think Divinity School was kind of like law school. The training helps guide you through the issues and problems of life," he said. "I'm definitely more spiritual now than before I attended Divinity School, and the education gave me a much greater appreciation for the different cultures, beliefs, religions and philosophies that have evolved throughout history and that presently exist."

What Martin didn't discover, however, was the meaning of life. Nor did he experience the epiphany he desired.

In an effort to keep learning, he enrolled in an LL.M. program in mass tort ethics at Harvard Law School. Two weeks into the program, on Sept. 16, 2004, Hurricane Ivan hit his hometown, destroying the family law firm that employed 28 attorneys and 150 staff members.

He immediately left law school to oversee arrangements for moving the firm into makeshift quarters and spent the next 18 months getting the firm back into its original building and handling everything from contractors to communications. He also got involved in various charitable organizations.

"Physically, Martin is small in stature, but he is a man of big ideas, actions, kindness and intelligence," said Millard Fuller, the founder and longtime CEO of Habitat for

Humanity International. Martin now assists Fuller in his newest charity, The Fuller Center for Housing. "He is a tremendous encourager to me, and I speak with him often for his advice and support."

After Hurricane Ivan, Martin began spending two weeks each month in Pensacola moving projects ahead, and then like clockwork would return home to Boston for two weeks to be with his wife and son Dustin, now four.

These days Martin continues to head up another family business, Consolidated Technology Solutions, as well as the family's non-profit foundation, which concentrates on providing for the basic needs of children. The foundation has done everything from giving away 10,000 pairs of shoes to impoverished school children to helping build a center for abused youngsters and a camp for terminally ill and special needs children.

"Martin made a lot of money practicing law, but he gave a lot of it away. Now he forces me to give my money away," said Fred Levin, who most recently provided major funding (see page 14) for a new advocacy center at UF law's school. "I don't have hobbies. I

work. But, Martin has impressed on me that I can't take the money with me and I might as well enjoy giving to others."

Martin will begin teaching trial law this fall at New England School of Law in Boston and will continue serving on the Board of Advisors for Harvard Divinity School.

He also commits his time and resources to the World Centers of Compassion for Children, an international non-profit organization working to improve the lives of children, especially those of war-torn countries. The organization is run by Nobel Peace Prize laureate Betty Williams and counts other laureates on its Board of Advisors, including the Dalai Lama, Desmond Tutu, Mikhail Gorbachev, Lech Walesa and Elie Weisel.

"Martin is one of those rare individuals who lives by an ethic of acts and reflections. Doing good for others is, for Martin, like breathing in and breathing out; he does it naturally," said Williams. "This year he will accompany me to Dharamsala (a town in India with Tibetan exiles) where, with His Holiness the Dalai Lama, I will lead a 'PeaceJam' for the children of Tibet. His participation in this event will be invaluable."

One thing that has not changed over the last few years is his unwavering introspection.

"Why was I born with a silver spoon and never had to worry about basic needs? Why is it that I was able to concentrate on staying motivated in my career? Is it chance, destiny, fate?" he asks. "I wish I knew the answer."

"Right now I'm still contemplating the ultimate issues. What can I do now to have the biggest impact and to do the most good? I know it sounds corny and cliché, but I want to be involved in the betterment of our world. The truth is, however, that the most we can do is likely the little things we all know we should do."



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