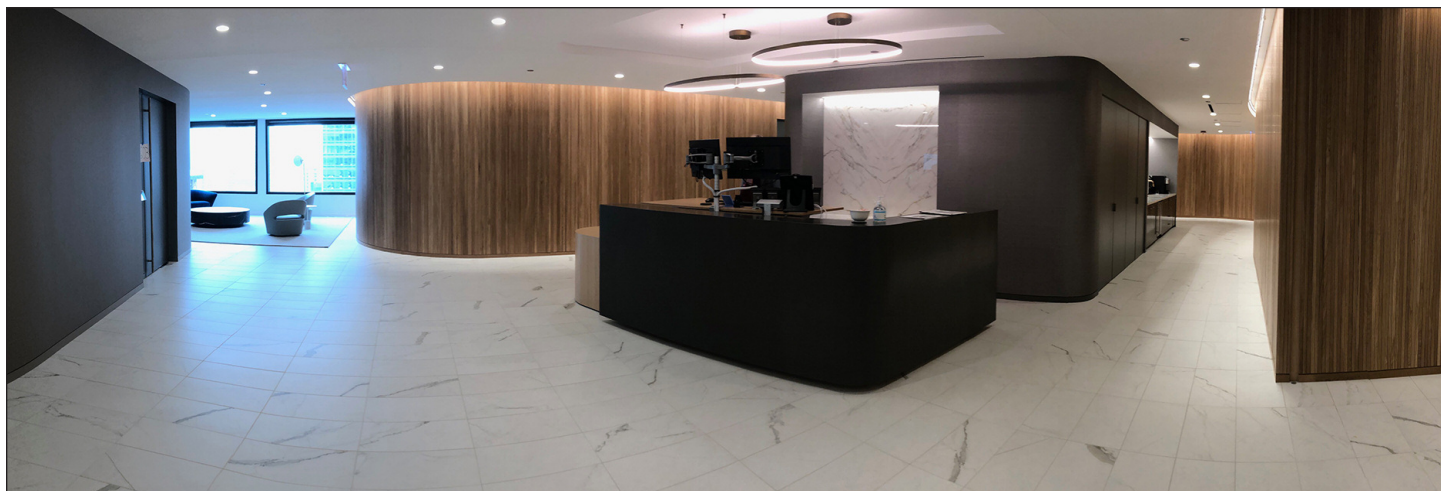


# Chicago Daily Law Bulletin®

VOLUME 167, NO. 16

LAW BULLETIN MEDIA



## Schiller DuCanto & Fleck marks 40th year with new office

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Schiller DuCanto & Fleck, which bills itself as the largest family law firm in the country, celebrated its 40th anniversary last week.

“It’s unbelievable 40 years have passed since Joe DuCanto and I decided to start this firm,” said Donald C. Schiller, who still serves as chairman of the firm. “We dreamed of becoming a large firm, but we never thought we would be this big.”

Schiller and DuCanto joined forces in 1981 after working the opposite sides of a big case.

“We were both very busy at the time and had thought we needed more help,” Schiller said. “A mutual acquaintance of ours, David Linn, who had been a divorce lawyer and became a circuit court judge, had suggested we might work well together — but we needed more of a push.”

That push came in the

form of a divorce case involving a millionaire real estate developer.

“I was representing the man, who had built a large shopping center in the suburbs and condo developments, and Joe was representing his wife. It was a very complex case. My client’s income was over \$10 million a year, and there were lots of tax issues involved, which was Joe’s specialty. The case went on for almost a year, and we developed a deep respect for each other and decided to go ahead and form a partnership.”

DuCanto died in 2013 at 85 years old. But in a 2006 interview with the Daily Law Bulletin, DuCanto, said that by 1981 he was less interested in personally trying cases, inspiring him to partner with Schiller, “a budding young divorce attorney who loved trials.”

DuCanto started his career in tax law and moved into family law in the 1960s. His

experience with financial matters became critical to his family law success in 1977 when the Illinois Marriage and Dissolution of Marriage Act became law.

The questions in divorce shifted at that point from “who did what to whom?” to “where’s the money and how to divide it?” DuCanto said in the 2006 interview.

Schiller said their respective backgrounds in business law quickly offered an advantage.

“Before the law changed, divorce law was much less complex. Both parties kept anything that was only in their name, and anything they both owned was split down the middle,” he said. “The biggest issue was usually figuring out how much alimony the wife would get paid and for how long.”

Within a year of its founding the firm was up to five attorneys. Among the early additions in 1982 was Charles J. Fleck, who served as pre-

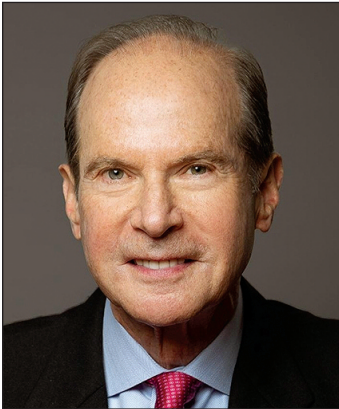
siding judge of the Domestic Relations Division of the Cook County Circuit Court.

“It just kept growing,” Schiller said. “We didn’t expect it to grow so fast, but we were very fortunate to receive the level of respect and support we got from the public.”

The firm is still growing today. Last week it moved into an office at 321 N. Clark St to accommodate its 46 attorneys and other staff.

“Our founders had a vision of what they wanted this firm to be — they wanted to recreate the deep bench of experience large firms had in a family law focused practice,” said Meighan A. Harmon, the firm’s managing partner. “It’s a different world than it was 40 years ago, so we want to foster an environment that makes that vision effective in 2021.”

Harmon said the space is designed to facilitate teamwork — once staff fully returns to in-person work after the pandemic.



**Donald C. Schiller**



**Meighan A. Harmon**



**Anita M. Ventrelli**



**Karen Pinkert-Lieb**

“It’s a very beautiful, custom designed space which we think is going to be ideal for our practice.”

“As the firm grows, it’s not as intimate as it once was,” Harmon said. “We wanted a space that will encourage contact and collaboration as we continue to grow.”

After having no women in equity partner roles for the first two decades, now half of Schiller DuCanto Fleck’s equity partners are women. The firm’s executive committee comprises Schiller, Harmon and partners Karen Pinkert-Lieb and Anita M. Ventrelli.

Harmon said the transformation was a strategy decades in the making.

“When I came to the firm in 2001, there were no

women equity partners,” Harmon said. “There’s been a lot of progress made in the last 20 years, and that is 100% attributable to the vision of our founders. They wanted to make it possible for women attorneys who were moms to succeed, so they encouraged us and hung in there with us. It’s awesome.”

Schiller said it took “a long time” to happen.

“There weren’t a lot of women lawyers in the early ‘80s. There was only one at the firm in our first year, then another joined after a year or two,” he said.

In those days, the founders had to push back against clients who did not want women lawyers handling their cases.

“We told them, ‘No, these are the best lawyers coming out of law schools,’” Schiller said. “And we went ahead and added more.”

Ventrelli started as a clerk with Schiller in 1988 while still in law school.

“When I was younger they didn’t have as many attorneys, and they relied on the clerks to do everything we were possibly allowed to do — no depositions or court appearances or actually advising clients — but everything else we did. It was a great learning experience,” she said. “We really hit the ground running.”

As a young associate, she was able to draw connections with colleagues on opportunities in any given case.

“I have a friend who works

in family law at another firm who once compared our jobs to me by saying ‘I work in a M.A.S.H. unit, you work in a teaching hospital,’” she said.

Kimberly A. Cook spent 13 years of her career at Schiller before starting her own mediation business, Dovetail Conflict Resolution, last month.

“My career thus far has been defined by what I learned at Schiller,” Cook said. “I think the most important thing I learned was that you don’t have to be the loudest person in the room to be the most effective. Don is the epitome of that. There were a lot of things I gained there, but that’s a hard lesson for a lot of people to learn, and it serves lawyers and their clients well.”