

Karl Kuppler

Estate, Trust, Tax Lawyer Is a Counselor at Heart

by Jason Nevel



PEORIA — Looking back on his legal career, Peoria-based attorney Karl B. Kuppler says he has fond memories of the people he worked with and the knowledge he gained at his first gig out of law school.

But, he says, it was the stationery at the now shuttered Chicago firm of Isham Lincoln & Beale that has stuck with him the most throughout his career of more than 30 years.

Kuppler, a partner at **Hasselberg, Rock, Bell & Kuppler LLP**, says every piece of stationery at the legendary firm included the phrase “Counselors at Law.”

He initially found the wording peculiar because people in his line of work are usually referred to as lawyers or attorneys. But the longer he practiced — with a focus on estate planning, probate and trusts and tax laws — the more he understood and embraced that phrase.

While criminal defense attorneys and prosecutors may enjoy the battle in the courtroom, Kuppler says, he has built his

legal career by offering sound advice and not theatrics.

He’s proud to help businesses and nonprofits in the Peoria area get off the ground, as well as provide advice that has allowed them to grow through tough economic times. In addition, Kuppler works with clients on wills with a keen eye for detail to make sure their wishes are carried out exactly as they want after they pass away.

His peers have recognized his ability by selecting Kuppler to serve on numerous boards, including as chairman of the Probate Practice Committee of the Peoria County Bar Association; on the Estate Planning, Probate and Trust Law Section Council of the Illinois State Bar Association; and as vice chair of the Tax Committee of the ABA’s General Practice Section. Kuppler is also a frequent lecturer on estate planning and tax topics for professional and community groups.

Even though his business card reads “attorney,” Kuppler considers himself a

counselor at heart to this day.

“I took that to heart from the very beginning,” he says. “There are a lot of ways to practice law and approach it. There are good lawyers who are looking for a fight and want that fight. That’s good for them, but the advice role is equally as important, especially in tax planning. Good advice keeps people out of trouble or from getting in disputes.”

Community Servant

Sharon Reed, artistic director for the Heritage Ensemble in Peoria, can speak firsthand on how Kuppler’s advice helped her organization. Kuppler played a pivotal role in getting the Heritage Ensemble recognized as a nonprofit by the state of Illinois.

The group, which celebrates African American history through music, was a spinoff of a larger nonprofit called Opera Illinois. Reed worked with Kuppler on Opera Illinois and realized he would be the perfect person to help start the Heritage

Ensemble, which is nearly two decades old.

“We try to tear down walls and build bridges to all people,” Reed says. “(Kuppler) has been part of that and helps us leverage our community resources for the success of Heritage Ensemble.”

Reed says Kuppler’s passion for helping nonprofits and giving back to the community extends beyond the Heritage Ensemble. She calls Kuppler a “quiet hero” who doesn’t seek recognition for anything he does for the Peoria community.

She also notes it speaks a lot about Kuppler’s character that he is the president of the board of an organization that promotes African-American heritage.

“He is not one who is out there blowing his own horn or is part of an organization so he can have his name on a lot of things,” she says. “I think everything he does he’s not expecting any accolades. Those are the kind of people who are the most effective.”

Reed does have one complaint, though, about her friend.

“He has a beautiful tenor voice, but I can never get him to sing with us,” she jokes. “If I have one problem, that is it.”

Kuppler, 58, says his professional singing days are long gone. At this point, he considers himself a “church choir kind of guy,” with occasional patriotic songs thrown into the mix. But music remains an important piece of his life, he says, which is why he has fought to keep music programs in the schools and supports organizations that give kids an opportunity to play music.

“Art organizations have really struggled in the last seven years,” he says. “I’ve always tried to support the arts in any way I can.”

Roberta Parks, vice president for the Unity Point Methodist/Proctor Foundation in Peoria, says she has known Kuppler for 30 years. The foundation supports hospitals, clinics and colleges in the Peoria area. Kuppler has served as chair and currently is on the finance committee. Like Reed, Parks also says Kuppler is a quiet leader who goes about helping in any way he can without seeking recognition.

Because he has been involved in so many organizations over the years, Parks says, Kuppler possesses and institutional knowledge of the Peoria community that has helped the foundation carry out its mission.

“He just keeps plugging away and doing the work that needs to be done,” she adds. “It’s easy to tell he really cares about the community.”

In addition to their connection through the nonprofit, Kuppler is also her lawyer. Parks says Kuppler helped set up her will in a way that clearly stated how she wanted her assets to be passed down.

“You want a lawyer to pay attention to detail and know what’s going on. He certainly fits that bill,” Parks says.

Kuppler says giving back to the community is incredibly important to him. He also works with other nonprofits, including the Peoria Symphony Orchestra, Rotary Club, Better Banks, Crittenton Center, Community Foundation of Illinois and Methodist Medical Center Foundation.

From 2004 to 2005, he served as president of the Rotary Club of Peoria. He credits his parents for his desire to take an active role in a variety of community organizations.

“My folks were very community oriented and always outdoors volunteering for things and helping fundraisers,” he says. “I definitely saw that as part of my citizen duty to give back to the community.”

‘Farm Boy’ From Quincy

Kuppler was the first one in his family to go to law school and become a lawyer. He was born in Germany while his father, Charles, was serving overseas in the military. However, his mother and father moved back to Illinois when he was a baby.

Kuppler says he grew up a “farm boy” like most kids did in the west central Illinois and Quincy areas. His father was a local celebrity because he was the lead agriculture broadcaster on the local television and radio stations.

“He was a big deal and still is a big deal in western Illinois and northeast Missouri,” Kuppler says about his father. “Any small town we went to, my dad worked the room like a politician.”

Kuppler, though, had other ambitions than following his father’s footsteps or pursuing a life dedicated to agriculture. He enrolled in North Central College in Naperville in 1974 believing he would either become a doctor or a lawyer.

It didn’t take long for him to pursue the latter, he says. He enrolled in a biology course at North Central College his freshman year and was introduced to dissection.

“The first time I cut into a frog, I decided law school was the way to go,” he says. “I did not like all the squishy stuff.”

Kuppler graduated *summa cum laude* from North Central in 1978 and enrolled in the University of Illinois College of Law. He knew early on that taxes and estate planning better suited him than criminal defense or litigation work.

While in Champaign, he took classes under well-known professor John McCord, who authored numerous books and papers on the tax code. Kuppler went on to co-author books with the professor, who died in 2011.

“I came out of the University of Illinois wanting to do tax and estates and that sort of thing,” he says. “For the past 34 years, that’s what I’ve done.”

Kuppler went to work for Isham Lincoln & Beale out of law school. At the time, the law office — with the memorable stationery — was one of the largest practices in Chicago and home to several well-known lawyers, including the former governor of Illinois, Richard Ogilvie.

In Chicago, he met his future wife, Cheryl, who was studying to be a lawyer. They got married, had a baby, and decided Chicago wasn’t the best place to raise a family. Plus, he and his wife weren’t big city people at heart, Kuppler says.

In 1985, a job opened up in Peoria and he and Cheryl — who opened up her own law office in Peoria with a focus on taxes — haven’t looked back, Kuppler says.

“They were looking for someone who did taxes and estate, so we came down here in ’85,” he says. “Peoria has been a good place to live and a great place to practice law.”

Continuing Education

It’s not surprising that the counselor at heart has some advice for young people interested in a legal career.

“My response hasn’t changed in years, which is a lawyer is mainly a professional writer,” Kuppler says. “On TV and in the movies, it would appear lawyers are professional speakers, but in fact for an office lawyer like me, all of your product is written. Ultimately, it’s the writing that counts.”

Kuppler also tries to serve as an adviser to other lawyers by teaching Continuing Legal Education courses regularly. Teaching the courses is another way for him to give back to the legal community, he says, and it forces him to stay on top of estate and tax planning developments.

“If you’re giving that class and 20 people are there, and all 20 go back to the office and use one thing you gave them, or think about or talk about something, you’ve certainly done some good,” he says.

When he retires — likely not anytime soon — Kuppler hopes people will remember him as someone who gave back to the profession and the community.

Maybe then he can find a business card with a more proper title that hearkens back to his mission as serving as a counselor.

“I’m a tax guy. We don’t want to litigate if we don’t have to,” he says.

“I still like that idea about being a counselor. I think a good lawyer can offer advice that helps avoid problems later on. I think I’ve done that in my career.” ■