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50 Years and Forward: An interview with Barry Caplan and his milestone with Sussman Shank LLP

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On April 22, 2018, Barry Caplan will reach a career milestone that few lawyers ever match – 50 years working at the same firm. Recently, he took time to reflect and respond to some questions about his half-century career at Sussman Shank. The time has gone by remarkably fast, he says, and it's not about to end anytime soon (knock on wood).

Q: How did this whole journey begin? What were you thinking?

A: I was raised in Portland and went to Grant High School. Our family owned a sports shop and my mother was a legal secretary (before she married my dad). My two older brothers were both in law school before I was out of high school. Thus, I had law or at least business in mind from the start. I went to the University of Washington for a BA in Business, then to the University of California in Berkeley for law school.

Q: What was your first job as a lawyer?

A: I worked in the Multnomah County DA's office for a few years after law school. It was a wonderful experience and I had about 100 jury trials. I was in court every day, worked with great lawyers, and appeared before wonderful judges. But my goal was always a career with a business law

firm. When I learned of an opportunity to join Sussman Shank, I looked into it and here I am.

Q: What was Sussman Shank like in those days?

A: There were only the three founders here when I started – all great lawyers. Working with Gil Sussman, Norm Wapnick, and Jerry Shank was an invaluable learning experience. Gil was a wonderful person and a great lawyer. As a younger lawyer, I could not have asked for better role models than Gil, Norm, and Jerry. As a small firm, we worked closely together on many matters and had quite a diversified business practice.

Q: What's changed since those early years?

A: In a word, everything! At first, modernizing the practice and adopting new technology. Then enlarging the scope of our practice, financing growth, bringing in more lawyers in specialty areas such as tax, and eventually moving to larger offices. I started when we were in a small office in the American Bank Building where we expanded some. In 1980, the firm made a big leap to the Congress Center. After considerable success there, we moved to our current location in 1992. There was constant and substantial growth in the depth and variation of our practice, particularly in the '80s.

Q: What was “technology” in law like in those days?

A: At first, electric typewriters and Dictaphones. We later got memory typewriters where our legal secretaries could make changes or corrections. But, it was all slow and labor-intensive. As computers, printers, and copiers came along in the 1980s everything speeded up; but there were many challenges for me and others – such as F codes. So many different keyboard F codes to remember. People now don't have a clue what an F code is. My mother insisted her sons all take typing in high school. She may not have known, but she allowed us to adjust to computers easily, simply because we could type fast!

Q: You were Sussman's first Managing Partner in 1980. How did that come about?

A: I suggested to the partners that we needed a better management infrastructure with at least one of us focused on day-to-day management. Be careful what you say: I talked my way into the role since nobody else really wanted it. I learned that law firms are just like any other business. They think they're unique, but they're not. Some keys to success are good client service, quality work, efficiency, excellent hiring, and keeping staff happy and productive. To keep good lawyers and staff we had the



goal to treat everyone fairly and reward performance. From the start, we've really cared about clients and staff.

Q: Any advice for new lawyers just starting out?

A: Start with a vision for what type of practice you wish to pursue. Form an idea of what kinds of clients you want to serve and what you enjoy doing most. Find what you like best and dive into it. It's as important as ever to work hard. If you want to become a partner, think and act like a partner from the start. An important component for success is the people you'll be working with. I came to Sussman Shank because of the excellent reputation of its people. Because of the founders' values and strong roots, it's no coincidence that after 50 years we still have that good rep and good people.

Q: Any stories or anecdotes from your own early days here?

A: Well, in my first year I helped Jerry Shank with research for a bankruptcy matter. He asked if I wanted to go to court with him for the hearing. I'd been up late the night before and hadn't slept well. I sat right behind Jerry in court. When he finished questioning a witness he turned to ask if I had any suggestions for further questions. I said nothing as I had fallen asleep! (Hot summer day!)

Q: You've been involved with the Campaign for Equal Justice for the past 12 years. What do you enjoy about it?

A: I've been very fortunate in life, but many Oregonians have not. For those with legal problems they can't afford, CEJ believes that giving them access to justice is a right, not a privilege. I believe that, too, and have tried to give time and money to help support this legal right for people. Much more help is needed for many Oregonians, and I hope to influence others to support CEJ. As a bonus, I get to work with many fine people, including some of the top leaders in Oregon.

Q: You've been married to your wife Barbara for 55 years. She must be a saint (joking).

A: We married young. She has been a major part of my success. We've shared our lives, which include two wonderful children and four grandkids, all rapidly growing up and giving us many more pleasures. Barbara has always been a great advisor who had her own successful business career. No real secrets to a long-term marriage. You both need to work at it. And you have to not only "love" but also "like" your spouse, ideally your best friend. We really enjoy doing different things together and that continues even more now.



Q: Any final thoughts on this milestone achievement? What lies ahead?

A: For the last 50 years (and 3 years before that) I've done exactly what I liked doing. I intend to continue for as long as I can. It didn't come easily, but was the result of valuable opportunities, wonderful clients, great firm and staff, professional associations, and of course, a lot of hard work. I only wish Gil Sussman and Jerry Shank were here to see what their firm has become. For over half that time, Norm Wapnick was a key factor in all that was achieved before he retired. And numerous former partners with whom I was close have either passed on or retired; but fortunately they were replaced by the outstanding and talented lawyers and staff here now. After my first 50 years, I believe our future is brighter than ever. I hope to remain part of that bright future, as I've been a part of our successful past.

[BPC 50th Anniversary Interview – Oregon Business Magazine](#)

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