

Passion and the practice of family law

By **Gary S. Joseph**

Law360 Canada (June 24, 2025, 1:39 PM EDT) -- This week I had the pleasure of attending a Toronto Lawyers Association event. It was a lovely evening. I had to leave early for another social event but while there I certainly noticed that I was clearly the oldest attendee. That fact must have been noticed by others as, a number of times that evening, I was approached and asked to comment on what qualities I believed are necessary to make one a good family lawyer. Happily, this is an issue that consumed a fair bit of my time during my tenure (now over, thank G-d) as managing partner of our firm.



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First and foremost, when, in the past, I was interviewing a candidate for a position with our firm as an associate, I tried to determine if the individual was just looking for a job or was truly interested in a career. The difference is significant. We only wanted those interested in the latter. The proof is "in the pudding," as they say, as each one of the current partners in our firm began as an associate with our firm. They each wanted a career with our firm and obviously found one.

A family lawyer, perhaps more than any other specialty practice of the law, must possess, in my view, a passion for people and a passion for problem-solving. To me, a new family law file is like a jigsaw puzzle spilled out on the floor. We family lawyers must have a passion for helping the client put the pieces of his/her life back together. As important, this passion must be obvious to the client. Again, as I have written before, there must be boundaries; we are not the client nor a cheerleader for the client, but we must possess that passion visible to the client, to guide the client through the family law maze: to put the puzzle back together.

To be a successful family lawyer, you must possess an analytical mind. You must want to "peel back the skin of the onion" as I call it. What, why, how and when must be a regular part of your vocabulary. You must see beyond the obvious and want to see beyond the obvious. You must relish the challenge of understanding complex issues and yearn for the ability to solve the challenge. Family law is the Rubik's Cube of legal practice.

Finally, there is no substitute for hard work and a willingness to work hard. However, as I have learned, struggled, but never quite succeeded with, the hard work must be set off with work-life balance. That balance will help you as a family lawyer endure the pressures and stresses of family law practice. I do have lots of enjoyable hobbies but balancing work with life's other demands has always been a challenge. I find the young lawyers better able to see the import of this than my generation of lawyers. Today, I say this is essential to successful family law practice.

Gary S. Joseph is counsel to the firm of MacDonald & Partners LLP. A certified specialist in family law, he has been reported in over 350 family law decisions at all court levels in Ontario and Alberta. He has also appeared as counsel in the Supreme Court of Canada. He is a past family law instructor for the Law Society Bar Admission Course and the winner of the 2021 OBA Award for Excellence in Family Law.

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