

Republished with the permission of the Chicago Daily Law Bulletin
Volume 150, No. 91
Copyright (c) 2004 by Law Bulletin Publishing Company

May 7, 2004

MUST BE SOMETHING IN THE DIBELLA GENES

Jerry Crimmins

The DiBella family -- Joseph (from left), Frank, Gina and Michael -- has always been close. They're continuing that tradition and soon will all share membership in the same profession: lawyer.

How many lawyers make a full house?

In the DiBella family of Northbrook and DePaul University, it looks like the answer will soon be four.

Brother Michael, 26, and sister, Gina, 25, will graduate from DePaul's College of Law on May 16.

The oldest brother, Joseph, 30, expects to graduate with a law degree from DePaul next school year. He'll be on the stage at the May 16 ceremony with the DiBella team.

Their father, Frank J., founder of Frank J. DiBella & Associates, 221 N. LaSalle St., got his law degree from DePaul in 1973.

"These are my blessings here," said Frank, 58, in an interview.

Asked how it all happened, Frank said, "I grew up in the Wrigleyville-Lakeview area, and we were all blue-collar kids."

"There wasn't a lawyer in the entire neighborhood," Frank remembered.

His father, who was from Sicily, was a laborer for the city who built curbs and gutters, Frank said. "I'd bring him lunch, and he'd be digging a hole. I saw him sweating for every buck he made."

In the American way, Frank went to college, at DePaul, then to law school part time and full time and worked many jobs including teacher, investigator, insurance representative, and, while in law school, cab driver.

He married his wife, Jean, while in law school, and Joseph came along in those days.

"I was a sole practitioner right out of the chute" after finishing law school, Frank said. "After having 27 jobs, I decided that once I got my sheepskin that no man would ever own my time."

After he acquired a few years' experience as a lawyer, Frank said he was fortunate enough to have The Chicago Bar Association certify him for the lawyer referral program in which criminal defendants are sometimes assigned CBA attorneys.

Frank got extensive trial experience that way in felonies and misdemeanors. Meanwhile, he built up a plaintiff personal-injury practice.

For PI work, "My entire practice has been word of mouth, one person to the other," Frank said. "I'm blessed in many ways."

In an unusual manner, the elder DiBella arranged his law practice so that he was often at his North Side home with his kids or, during the summer for 18 years, at Twin Lakes, Wis., where he bought a bait and boat business.

"He was at all of our football games and all kinds of events, and he was just always around for us," Joseph said.

"Now we understand that was very strange for an attorney" to be home so much, Joseph said.

When he did not have to be in court or at the CBA, Frank conducted much of his business by telephone. He rerouted his calls from his downtown office to his home or to his bait shop where he would answer, "Law office."

"He would always be on the phones, talking about law, and talking to us" about law, about his cases and case law, Joseph said.

As youngsters, their reaction to their father's lectures and legal stories, Joseph said, was "OK, Dad, whatever."

Joseph hoped to be a pro football player and did play fullback for Purdue University. (Frank said he himself had been an all-city and all-state football guard and linebacker at Lakeview High School.)

But Joseph suffered a career-ending football injury in 1996.

After that, his father built him up by comparing football to school and the law.

The father said, Joseph recalled, "You're going to find the same type of thrill in getting the grades." And, "When you prepare for trial and you're up all night studying, you'll still get that same rush, still get butterflies in the stomach before you're opening statement."

Joseph became a certified paralegal with Skadden, Arps, Slate, Meagher & Flom, where he is today.

At some point, Joseph and Michael and Gina all decided to go to law school.

"We've always been really tight," Joseph said. "We decided, 'Let's do this together.' "

Michael and Gina became full-time students, and Joseph part time while he works doing serious legal research for Skadden.

"The team atmosphere and the competitiveness, it's just awesome" at Skadden, Joseph said, "like football."

Michael will immediately enter his dad's law firm after graduation, according to the family. Gina is joining the law firm of Freeborn & Peters. Joseph, who has time to decide, is torn between the family firm and opportunities at major Chicago law firms, Frank said.

5/7/04 CHIDLB 3

END OF DOCUMENT