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COVER STORY

Building a Better Family Law Firm

Michael Berger on
the Evolution of
Berger Schatz

See page 3

Best Lawyers®
Lawyer of the Year
2013

Who are the 2013 Lawyers of the Year?

See page 15

Building a Better Family Law Firm: Michael Berger on the Evolution of Berger Schatz

From the outset of his legal career, Michael Berger's goal was to build a law firm. Berger, together with his fellow founding partners, established a practice that has become Berger Schatz, one of the largest divorce firms in the country.

"I realized long ago that having a firm would be much more advantageous for clients," Berger says. Along with the efficiencies of scale, Berger recognized that a larger law firm can provide intellectual and tactical resources for its clients. "It allows for the exchange of ideas," Berger explains, "And as a practical matter, you can only be in one place at a time, so having a large group of talented attorneys can be very helpful if an emergency arises."

With 36 lawyers, Berger Schatz is able to act as a comprehensive litigation resource in the family law field. The firm's attorneys provide the full range of matrimonial law services, handling divorces but also prenuptial and postnuptial agreements, marital settlements and parenting agreements, child custody and support matters, and adoption and assisted reproduction-related legal counseling.

"It's very gratifying to see the firm's growth over the last 25 years," Berger says. "We continue to be very successful in cases that are on the cutting edge of the law, and that's not something I take lightly."

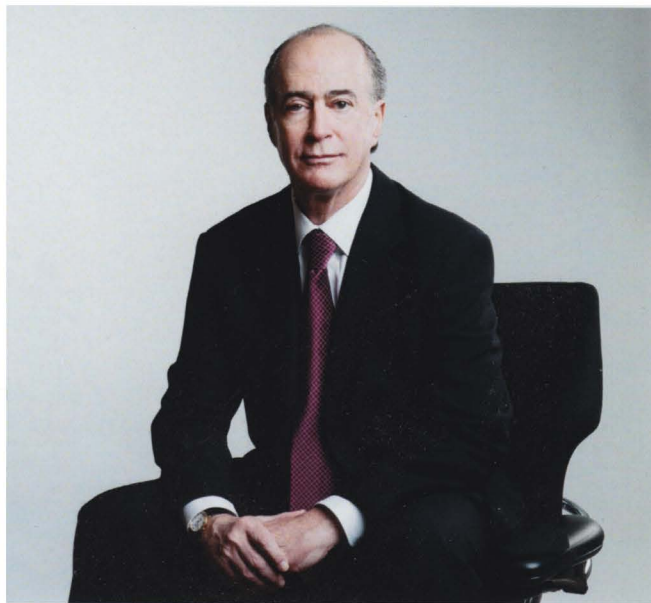
As a pioneer among firms specializing exclusively in matrimonial-related issues, Berger Schatz remains responsive to the ever changing nature of family law. In the past year, the firm established a family building practice to guide clients through the processes of adoption and assisted reproduction.

"Issues relating to fertility and adoption law are growing exponentially in Illinois and throughout the United States, so you need to have lawyers who can concentrate specifically on these complex matters," Berger explains. "And given our size, we're able to provide that." The firm has also enhanced its resources in the areas of mediation and collaborative law, with several partners practicing in those fields.

Berger, meanwhile, has developed a reputation for his knowledge of the financial and business aspects of family law proceedings. Over an almost 40-year career, Berger has acquired significant experience in cases requiring business valuations, segregation of personal and enterprise goodwill interests, and protection of non-marital assets from a spouse's marital claim. Indeed, Berger and his partners have devised new and unique theories in cases involving complicated corporate and financial issues—arguments that have been well received by the courts.

"I've spent many years learning these issues and keeping abreast of changes in the law as it relates to those matters," he says. "And not just in divorce cases, but in other aspects of the law as well, because those issues fundamentally touch on different practice areas, such as corporate, real estate, and tax law."

Berger Schatz's all-encompassing approach has proved beneficial to its clientele, which is comprised of accomplished



Michael Berger

professionals and high-net-worth individuals. "As your practice grows there becomes a need to know instead of just relying on outside experts," Berger observes. "There are many situations where we bring ideas to the outside experts that they accept and incorporate into their own opinions; I certainly couldn't do that if I had not learned on my own the many facets of business valuation."

Berger recognizes that his personality is well suited for assisting clients in such a personal area of the law: "It really wasn't my goal as a young lawyer to become a matrimonial attorney, but I started handling some divorce cases early on, and I found that I enjoyed helping people who were experiencing an emotional upheaval in their lives—it was very rewarding to help them effect a transition." Every attorney at Berger Schatz shares that fundamental goal, Berger notes proudly.

In recognition of his legal ability and ethical standards, Berger has achieved an AV Preeminent rating from Martindale-Hubbell, along with several of the firm's other partners. Many of the firm's lawyers are also regularly named in *Illinois Super Lawyers* or *Leading Lawyers*, and remain active in such organizations as the American Academy of Matrimonial Lawyers, the American Bar Association, and the Illinois State Bar Association.

In a tribute to Berger's reputation as a matrimonial attorney, he has been selected by his peers for inclusion in *The Best Lawyers in America* for each of the past five years. "To be considered in *Best Lawyers* is something I always wanted to achieve," he says. "I was thrilled when I received the designation, and I'm very happy to be renominated each year."