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George Aronoff ,89

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As a youngster, George Aronoff longed to follow his father, Harry, to work at the dry cleaning business he managed. But he was never allowed to join.

Harry would later tell George that it was because he felt the boy was destined for bigger things in the professional world.

So Aronoff charted his own path.

Brandishing a disarming personality, an even-keeled demeanor and an uncanny ability for reading and understanding people, Aronoff grew up to play an instrumental role in some pivotal years for the Benesch law firm.

Ira Kaplan, Benesch executive chairman and an Aronoff mentee, credits his work with laying the foundation for the AmLaw 200 firm's growth into the second-largest law firm in Northeast Ohio with well over 300 attorneys across all operations.

Aronoff is a consummate dealmaker who would be sought out by attorneys and clients for decades to come. While his work has slowed down following a career of nearly 70 years, his counsel remains in high demand today as he continues serving Benesch in its corporate and securities practice group.

And he almost didn't follow this path.

Aronoff's father was a product of the Great Depression who'd talk at the dinner table about how his lawyer friends fell out of jobs during the recession. Accountants, though, always had work.

That stuck with Aronoff, who pursued accountancy as he enrolled at Case Western Reserve University.


But he soon realized that wasn't for him. Aronoff loved school, but he was more a people person than a numbers guy, keen on talking and negotiating more than crunching numbers.

He completed his undergrad in psychology and toyed with the idea of medical school. But he was underwhelmed by that idea.

A high school vocational test indicated that he might take well to either journalism or law, so he defaulted to the latter to feed his hunger for additional education.

"I always enjoyed puzzles. And practicing law, even corporate business law, involved a lot of problem-solving," he said. "I also enjoyed dealing with people. And I found law to be challenging and intellectually rewarding. So I'm glad I found my way into the profession."

The Benesch firm was just 20 years old and had only a few lawyers when Aronoff joined 65 years ago.



Get the deal done. That translates to any business. If you don't successfully conclude what you're working at, nobody is going to say you're a success."

— George Aronoff

But he excelled at dealmaking and soon found himself in the throes of major transactions with hotshot New York attorneys. He is happy to share fond memories of working them over in contract negotiations that could turn tense. Aronoff has strong convictions and knew when to stick to his guns.

"Try to use your power in things you believe are important," Aronoff said. "And when you believe it to be important, you've got to stay with it. You can't get buffaloed into moving off something if you believe in it."

He knew there were times he needed to dial back the charm.

"One thing he has said to me is that people should understand that they should not mistake kindness for weakness," Kaplan said.

Kaplan explained how Aronoff's work allowed a relatively small firm in a corner of Ohio to punch above its weight class. He said the firm was sought out because business leaders "wanted George Aronoff at the table."

Clients and attorneys followed. And by 1975, Aronoff became one of the named partners at Benesch Friedlander Coplan & Aronoff.

So what's his secret?

"The key to success in the practice is to get the deal done," Aronoff said. "I use that frequently."

It's a philosophy equally simple and profound, as the best mantras are.

What it really means, Aronoff explains, is that the client is at the heart of everything a dealmaker — or anyone in any business, for that matter — does. You might do a fantastic job drafting documents and making arguments, but if you don't achieve the client's objectives, then what was really accomplished?

The puzzle has to be solved.

That philosophy continues to shape the cultural identity of Benesch to this day. His impact at the firm is truly part of his professional legacy.

"I don't think there are many people that have had more of an impact on certain elements of our community, both business and civic, that are more deserving of a recognition like this," Kaplan said.

"Luck is always a very important part of success in all fields," Aronoff said. "And I consider myself very lucky."

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