

# The Cleaner

by ANDY STEINER

## Berry F. Laws III likes to handle messy cases

Sometimes when a person dies with a little money in the bank, things can get messy. And other times, things can just get plain weird. From stolen dolls to contested sex shops, Berry F. Laws III has seen it all.

Many attorneys avoid this emotionally and logistically complicated work. But not Laws, 53, managing partner of Kansas City-based firm Martin, Leigh, Laws & Fritzen. He relishes rolling up his sleeves and digging into the messiest of cases. And he has developed quite a reputation.

"I've done so many of this type of thing that the judges around here designate me as the 'go-to guy' when there's an off-color or complicated estate litigation case," Laws says. "It sure beats sitting in an office processing interrogatories. I run companies. You don't get to do this a lot as a traditional fiduciary attorney."

Laws built his reputation 13 years ago when he was appointed to investigate a case in which a group of Jackson County public probate workers were accused of plotting to defraud estates they had been hired to represent.

In one of the cases, Laws discovered that the group had "stolen over \$500,000 from an old lady who had a very expensive doll collection. The judge appointed me as lead council to investigate and file suits and coordinate with the prosecutor's office. I filed the civil proceedings, and all individuals involved eventually went to prison."

After the Case of the Missing Dolls, Laws' assignments kept getting stranger.

A little more than a decade ago, a judge appointed him to take over the operation of E.R. Morris Funeral Home, a financially troubled Kansas City mortuary.

"The owner of the home had passed away and there were fights within the family about who should succeed to the ownership of the home," Laws explains. "There were will contests and petty arguments. So I stepped in and got involved in the funeral business."

Getting involved in the funeral business meant getting up close and personal with all aspects of the company. Acting as court-appointed CEO, Laws toured the facility, studying the services it provided. In order to settle the case and move the family out of receivership, he needed to understand what went on at the operation — from the ground up.

"I was a little taken aback upon seeing the people in the funeral home," Laws says. "When I say 'people,' I'm talking about the non-living. I didn't embalm bodies or anything like that, but it was my job to learn everything about the funeral home, and that is a big part of what they do."

Eventually, Laws was able to get family members to agree to a settlement. Acting as a mediator, he negotiated buyouts for some parties,

settled outstanding debts and helped select individuals to place in leadership positions.

"It takes time, but in the end there's always a resolution," he says.

One of Laws' most complicated fiduciary cases was also one of his most notorious. In 1998, he was appointed to administer Erotic City, a multimillion-dollar adult entertainment complex in Jackson County, Mo. The owner had died unexpectedly without leaving a will, and his family (eight children by various mothers) and business associates were fighting for control.

For six years, Laws became the CEO of Erotic City. "I didn't sit in the physical building every day," he says, "but I was running the business. There were a lot of people trying to muscle their way in, and I had to use various legal means to keep them at bay."

Eventually, after negotiating a series of buyouts, Laws was able to help establish new leadership at Erotic City and step away from the company's daily operations. "It took a long time, but we were finally able to clean that place up," he says.

Growing up in Kansas City, Laws never expected to become an attorney. He always thought that legal work would be boring, a lot of sitting behind a desk and shuffling papers. But his grandfather knew different.

"He always told me that I was going to be the first lawyer in the family," Laws says with a laugh. "With a name like Laws, how can you avoid it?"

Laws didn't take a direct route to legal practice. From 1970 to 1973 (beginning at the age of 17) he served in the Marine Corps. After a brief stint working in the oil fields, he went to college and then on to law school. An early probate case opened his eyes to the promise of fiduciary law. His firm now has four offices in Missouri and Kansas and employs 80 people. Over the years, he's handled more than \$150 million in trust or estate money.

At work, Laws sees people at their worst. The experience has made him wiser — and more wary — when it comes to preparing for his own demise.

"Before you go, make sure your family gets along," he advises. "Make sure they understand your intent and wishes before you die. But if there's a lot of money at stake, odds are someone is still going to feel cheated. So it might be a better idea to just spend it along the way." ❖



Former Marine Laws aboard the destroyer USS Preble.



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Mr. Heinemann has significant experience in a wide range of litigation matters, including product liability defense, insurance coverage litigation, commercial litigation, class actions, and defending businesses against employment claims. He represents clients in state and federal courts nationwide. He was a federal judicial clerk to the Honorable James K. Logan of the United States Court of Appeals for the Tenth Circuit. He is a 1987 graduate of the Duke University School of Law (high honors, Order of the Coif) and served on the Editorial Board of the *Duke Law Journal*. He is a member of the Kansas and Missouri Bar Associations.



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Robert O. (Bob) Jester has an extensive practice that encompasses all aspects of business law, corporate law, real estate, and commercial litigation. He also serves as lead counsel in the defense of public entities and public officials, the transportation industry, and insurance clients in both state and federal courts. Bob is a member of the Defense Research Institute, the American Bar Association, the Missouri and Kansas City Bar Associations, and the National Association of Auto Dealer Counsel. He frequently lectures on issues important to his clients. Recently, Bob served as the President of Sertoma International, the country's third oldest civil service organization founded in Kansas City, Missouri, in 1912.



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Mark T. Kempton focuses his practice on litigation in a variety of matters, including personal injury, medical malpractice, product liability, commercial and business claims, employment discrimination and criminal cases. A graduate of the University of Missouri - Columbia (B.A., 1973; J.D., 1976), Mr. Kempton was awarded the Lon O. Hocker Memorial Trial Lawyer Award by the Missouri Bar Foundation in 1984. He is a Fellow and former Missouri State Chair of the American College of Trial Lawyers. He is also a member and former chapter president of the American Board of Trial Advocates and a member of the International Society of Barristers.



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Kurt Kerns started his career as a corporate litigator for Redmond, Redmond & Nazar. His frequent courtroom victories in criminal litigation convinced him that this was his calling in the legal profession. His very first murder trial resulted in an outright acquittal. The Dr. Stan Naramore murder trial soon followed, which was featured on A&E Network's *American Justice*. Naramore was acquitted. He went on to obtain ten consecutive federal jury trial victories before experiencing his only federal trial defeat in 1998 (his client was caught with 3,000 pounds of marijuana in his semi-truck). Currently, of eight murder trials, seven have resulted in outright acquittals with one lesser manslaughter conviction. Most recently, Mr. Kerns represented Croatian Army Commander Vinko Martinovic at the Hague War Crimes Tribunal. Mr. Kerns is a frequent lecturer at seminars across the nation.



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Paul W. King exclusively advises and represents management clients regarding all manner of labor and employment law issues, including: collective bargaining and plant closure negotiations; related strike supervision; contract enforcement and arbitration proceedings; Fair Labor Standards Act compliance, and defending against U.S. Department of Labor investigations and employee wage-hour claims; investigating and defending against employment discrimination charges; union organizing campaigns and elections, and unfair labor practice proceedings before the National Labor Relations Board; litigation of non-compete agreement, duty of loyalty, and Trade Secrets Act cases; developing personnel policies; and general counseling and training of supervisors.



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Charles is a business advisor and deal facilitator, representing companies and key individuals in all aspects of business endeavors, as well as being an aggressive trial lawyer. General counsel to several companies, his trial accomplishments include establishing the outermost limits by which a circumstantial case can be won, and winning both sides of the same argument in the same case (the appellate court was not amused). Also: Colgate University and Washington University School of Law graduate (Order of the Coif), federal law clerk, adjunct professor, co-author of an article for the *Detroit College of Law Review*, and writer for a syndicated newspaper column ([www.underanalysis.com](http://www.underanalysis.com)).



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Scott Kreamer is a member of the firm's executive committee. He has successfully defended corporations at the trial level in both state and federal courts. He has also prevailed in numerous appellate arguments in various jurisdictions. He has represented clients in commercial, construction, employment, FELA, fidelity and surety, insurance, lender liability, product liability and telecommunications matters and regularly handles cases seeking class certification. Scott has also served as national counsel in toxic tort litigation. He is a member of the Kansas, Missouri and Nebraska Bar Associations, DRI, FDCC and ABA. Additionally, he has co-authored a book and numerous papers. Scott frequently lectures at conferences across the country and is a Dean in the FDCC's Litigation Management College.



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Berry F. Laws, III, is the managing shareholder of Martin, Leigh, Laws & Fritzlen, P.C., with offices in Kansas City, St. Louis and Overland Park. Mr. Laws is involved in handling creditors' rights, probate and litigation. He is appointed by Missouri Courts to act as a receiver and has extensive experience acting as a fiduciary and overseeing multimillion-dollar businesses. The Missouri Supreme Court appointed Mr. Laws as a Disciplinary Officer of the Missouri Bar. He serves as a Master Practitioner for Inns of Court for UMKC School of Law and is also a shareholder in a title company, MoKan Title Services, Inc. Mr. Laws is a member of several attorney and industry organizations including the AFN, MBA, NAGTT, NARCA, REOMAC, USFN and UTA.



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Scott K. Logan has been involved in litigation and trial work for the entirety of his law practice. Starting out as a prosecutor, his practice shifted to the civil arena, where he has been involved in the defense of personal injury cases with an emphasis on the defense of professional malpractice cases. He has been lead counsel in over 100 jury trials and trials to the courts throughout Kansas and Missouri, including various federal courts. He has also devoted a significant part of his practice to alternative dispute resolution, including acting as a mediator in various personal injury cases. He is a frequent lecturer on litigation topics, and is AV-rated by Martindale-Hubbell.