

Attorney Stephen Heuston builds thriving litigation practice representing nonprofit entities statewide; expands office to accommodate staff growth

By Ken Datzman

In the business world, there is the saying, “find a niche and fill it.” Often, that is challenging because there is increasing competition everywhere for products and services.

The same goes for the legal profession. Separating yourself from the large field of practicing attorneys isn’t always easy to do.

But Stephen Heuston, a longtime area attorney, has seen the nonprofit sector niche transform his career and take his law practice to new heights.

“I got a case with The Salvation Army some 25 years ago as a young lawyer working in Washington, D.C.,” he said. “That case really opened a new avenue to me — representing charities. When you represent one charity, soon you are representing another and another. Many of the largest charities in the nation have a presence in Florida.”

Today, Heuston still has several nonprofit clients in D.C., including the Humane Society of the United States. He has represented that organization for years.

After years of practicing in Brevard with another firm, he established Heuston Legal in March 2018 in Melbourne.

Heuston Legal is a firm comprised of estate, trust, probate, and litigation lawyers.

“My practice in some ways is traditional with wills, trusts, and probate,” he said. “But in a huge way it’s nontraditional. The biggest part of my practice is representing charities in estates or trusts where there is a problem. We currently have cases in 31 counties across Florida. We are all over the state, working cases from Jacksonville to the Keys, in the middle of the state, and up and down both coasts. We are positioned as a one-stop law firm for charities.”

Heuston Legal is branding itself as the “Champion for Charities.”

Being in Melbourne, his firm is strategically located to many communities around the state.

“I can get to almost anyplace in Florida within a three-hour drive. Naples is the exception. It’s about a four-hour drive. There are many communities in Florida that are experiencing strong growth. We’re seeing this up close on our travels around the state.”

He added, “We’re getting a lot of cases in Osceola County and in Lake County. Brevard is growing too. It’s easy to sell this community to attract lawyer talent. I can’t imagine a more beautiful community. And we have one of the most educated populations in Florida, especially because of the many high-tech companies that operate on the Space Coast.”

Charities often find themselves involved in complex estate and trust matters and need an advocate and advisor to guide them, he said. They need an advocate, for example, when a disgruntled heir challenges their beneficiary interest.

Charitable organizations also need an advisor when they are unsure how to respond to issues in an estate or trust of which the charity is named as a beneficiary.

“If someone is trying to take part of the gift that was designated by the donor and put it in their pocket, then they have to fight,” said Heuston. “I have taught charities how to fight in a reasonable and professional manner, basically to stand up for what was intended to go to them under the will or trust. Don’t back down.”



BBN photo — Adrienne B. Roth

Heuston Legal located at the Gateway Business Center in Melbourne has expanded its practice to accommodate strong growth. Veteran attorney Stephen Heuston, center, founded the firm in 2018 and is the managing attorney. The practice’s niche is representing charitable organizations. Heuston Legal is working in 31 counties around the state. The firm is branding itself as the ‘Champion for Charities.’ Austin Payne, left, and James Pretorius, both graduates of UF’s Levin College of Law, are associate attorneys at the practice.

Heuston is the managing attorney at his practice at the Gateway Business Center on Gateway Drive. He is board-certified in wills, trusts, and estates by the Florida Bar.

Heuston is on the Executive Council of the Real Property, Probate and Trust Law Section of the Florida Bar. The Section is comprised of more than 10,000 attorneys throughout the state. About 120 attorneys are on the Executive Council.

“The Executive Council basically runs the Section and promotes exceptionalism and professionalism in the area of law,” he said. “Attorney Charlie Nash got me involved in

that organization many years ago.”

The Section provides a forum for discussion on legal issues in the areas of real property, probate, wills/estates, and trust law.

Heuston Legal has just expanded its office, going from 2,500 square feet to 5,000 square feet, to accommodate the growing practice.

Stephen Heuston’s daughter, Victoria Heuston, was instrumental in opening the practice. Victoria Heuston just

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completed her second year at Florida State University College of Law. She is on track to earn her juris doctor degree in May 2024.

"My daughter has both an artistic mind and a legal mind," said her father. "She is No. 2 in her class at FSU and is knocking it out of the park."

Victoria Heuston was awarded her undergraduate degree in fine arts and sculpture from the University of Florida. "She encouraged me and helped me open this office," he said. "Victoria played a big role in the office design and the color scheme, and much more."

The office has uplifting bright colors. American Business Interiors in downtown Melbourne provided the furnishings for Heuston Legal.

Victoria Heuston has also served the firm as a probate legal assistant, hiring coordinator, case manager, operations manager, and billing and accounts receivable clerk.

Stephen Heuston's wife Denise is the firm's finance director, financial analyst, and forensic accountant. She has a bachelor's degree in industrial engineering and 13 years' experience as a certified public accountant.

And their son Thomas Heuston is the practice's finance manager. He earned undergraduate degrees in finance, accounting, and real estate from the University of Central Florida.

"We have the whole family involved," said Stephen Heuston, a graduate of George Washington School of Law in the nation's capital.

Joining Stephen Heuston on the attorney team are Austin Payne and James Pretorius. They are both associate attorneys and graduates of the University of Florida Levin College of Law, which is ranked among the top 25 law schools in America. The ranking is according to the latest "U.S. News & World Report" compiling.

"We are going to continue to build and grow the practice," said Stephen Heuston. "We're thrilled to have two young attorneys who are law graduates of UF. They love it here. Austin Payne knew he wanted to practice in the areas of estate and trust. He has a certificate in that specialty from UF. James Pretorius likes business and tax and other practice areas, but both of them are geared toward our practice's niche."

A Brevard native, Payne was awarded his law degree in 2018 and is skilled in drafting wills, trusts, powers of attorney, and health-care surrogate documents.

Pretorius is a 2020 law graduate. Before becoming an attorney, Pretorius was a business executive, a high school calculus teacher, and a young men's tennis coach in Central Florida.

Stephen Heuston, who has more than 30 years' experience in his field, is mentoring the two attorneys. "I make myself available to them day and night to make sure they are the best qualified estate and trust attorneys, and estate and trust litigators in Florida. I have a lot of experience. I pour myself into them as if they were my own children."

The Heuston Legal team includes: Milton Ortega, administrative assistant; Lilly Walters, intake coordinator, charitable liaison, and fiduciary legal assistant; Jessica Hernandez, Florida certified paralegal; Kathy Tompkins, Florida certified paralegal; and Cheryl Zamojski, Florida certified paralegal.

Stephen Heuston said he was "surprised" that he was able to build a practice around the nonprofit world. "I couldn't do this in the Brevard market alone, but statewide the charity market for us is a growing enterprise. And they are the nicest clients. It's a pleasure to represent them."

He added, "There are many attorneys in Brevard that do estate planning and there are many attorneys that do probate work. But only a handful specialize in estate and

trust litigation in the county. This is all we do, and we do it on a full-time basis."

Stephen Heuston grew up in eastern Washington and earned his undergraduate degree in business from the University of Washington in Seattle. After graduation, he moved to Washington, D.C. "I wanted to work in politics," he said.

His positions there included being a legislative assistant to U.S. Sen. Jeremiah Denton of Alabama, who was in office from 1981-87. "Sen. Denton was a very interesting person to work for," said Stephen Heuston. "He was one of first people I worked for on the Senate side."

Denton, a graduate of the U.S. Naval Academy, was a naval aviator taken captive during the Vietnam War. Denton was widely known for enduring eight years of grueling conditions as a prisoner of war in North Vietnam after the A-6 Intruder he was piloting was shot down in 1965.


Stephen Heuston worked in politics for three years in D.C. "When I started there, Tip O'Neill was Speaker of the House of Representatives. That was long ago." Thomas "Tip" O'Neill, a Democrat from Massachusetts, was

Speaker from 1977 to 1987.

Stephen Heuston's mentor in D.C. suggested he go to law school. "And I did. I went to George Washington University Law School. After I graduated, I thought I would go back to work on Capitol Hill and that would be my career, but it wasn't. I met my then future wife in D.C. I got a job with a firm in that area doing wills, trusts, and probate law. I really embraced that type of work. I had interesting clients, including many high-net-worth families."

Denise Heuston was born and raised in Vero Beach. Stephen and Denise Heuston decided to leave D.C. and move to Florida.

"Charlie Nash gave me my first job. I worked for the firm he was with up until about five years ago," said Stephen Heuston, adding that Nash went out on his own years ago. Stephen Heuston also wanted to start his own law firm. "At first, I was fearful of doing that. I was always with other attorneys. It was a big step forward, a lot more responsibility. But it worked out great. Now we are setting up this practice to go on and on. We're building it for the future with young lawyers. It's exciting."



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