



Shirley Kaigler

Protecting Financial Legacies of Detroit Area Families Fulfills Her Father's Dream

by Dustin J. Seibert

SOUTHFIELD — Shirley A. Kaigler did not want to be a lawyer initially. Her father had that ambition.

A World War II Navy veteran, Maurice Powers was well-read and politically oriented, Kaigler says. But the realities of growing up as a poor black man in the small town of Atmore, Alabama — from where he moved to Detroit with Kaigler's mother Bessie — prevented his career goals from coming to fruition.

"Because he was the oldest male of 11 children, he could only go to school when his family was not harvesting crops," Kaigler says. "He'd miss half of his school year, and in a small place without a lot of financial opportunities like Atmore, pursuing higher educational goals was not easy."

Powers, who passed away in 2004, lived to see Kaigler — his middle child and oldest daughter — become an attorney herself. Kaigler is a partner at Southfield-based **Jaffe Raitt Heuer & Weiss PC**, where she has focused on estate planning and elder law for just over 20 years.

"I felt proud that he was proud of me," she says. "While it is not something that he pushed me to do, I was proud of the accomplishment of being the first one in our family to graduate from college."

Big Three Beginnings

Powers supported Kaigler, her mother and her four siblings through a career shared by many unskilled, non-formally educated Detroiters at the time: working on the automotive line for Chrysler and taking on a second job to make ends meet.

"In Detroit, you could do well with a factory job at that time," she says. "We weren't like 'Leave It to Beaver,' but we were very comfortable. My parents had a deep religious faith and valued education and hard work."

Kaigler's only exposure to the field of law was through shows she watched on television and her voracious reading habit. Though a generation separated Powers and Kaigler, her career expectations

remained racially and gender biased. As a student at Cass Technical High School in the 1960s, counselors pushed for her to become a legal secretary.

"That was the epitome of a skillset for a woman," she says. "We were not encouraged to be attorneys."

Though her father talked about how he would have become an attorney if he had a formal education, at a young age it did not motivate Kaigler to consider becoming one.

"My career aspirations changed a few times," she says. "I wanted to be a business education teacher, then a social worker, then an accountant...professions more commonly associated with women."

Kaigler attended Eastern Michigan University then transferred to Wayne State University, where she ultimately decided to study social work. She interned with a marriage counseling agency in Oakland County but realized in her last year of college that the limitations of social work would not allow her to pursue her true passions.

"Given the kinds of challenges people face — financially and from a lack of services — I realized that some of the resources we offered were like Band-Aid for their problems," she says. "But as an attorney, you can educate and empower people to move out of their situation as opposed to simply having them apply for governmental assistance."

"People can access legal opportunities by doing something as simple as fighting a wrongful traffic stop or by taking a landlord who is treating them unfairly to court. The law is part of our everyday life, and it has always been important for me to help others use it as a tool."

A close friend, along with her then-future husband, Dr. Darnell Kaigler, encouraged Kaigler to enroll in law school. While at University of Michigan Law School, she learned that tax law, banking law and property law were her most intriguing classes. They would eventually lead her to a career in estate planning.

Perhaps the biggest appeal of estate planning for Kaigler was that it would allow her to interact with individuals on an intimate level.

"I was able to serve people directly, not just companies, and that was very important to me," she says.

Kaigler entered law school without a meaningful peer or professional support base. She connected with a Detroit magistrate, the Honorable Jessie Slaton, who was one of the first African-American magistrates in Detroit's city government and was also a member of Kaigler's sorority, Delta Sigma Theta.

Slaton was killed as a passenger on Korean Airlines Flight 007, which was infamously shot down by a Soviet missile in 1983.

"She was the visible embodiment of what I wanted to become," Kaigler says of Slaton. "She was super-sharp and attractive; she walked in the room and people noticed. She was a lawyer who was active in her community, and I could emulate her. But her being a woman of color was even more special because it gave me the idea that professionally I could be like her. She became my mentor and friend."

A Big Decision

Upon graduating law school, Kaigler worked for two years in the taxation department for what is now EY (Ernst & Young), where she focused on estate gift and income tax planning. That position played a large part in crafting the rest of her career.

"Working there allowed me to understand the types of personal and tax issues important to individuals as they accumulate wealth, as well as how to navigate the world of philanthropy," she says.

Kaigler was married at the end of her second year of law school. She had their first child three weeks after graduating and six weeks before taking the bar exam. After having two additional children, she realized she did not wish to miss their formative years because of work.

So she left her tax practice, took a six-month hiatus and opened her own firm, The Law Offices of Shirley A. Kaigler, where she worked on probate matters, wills, trusts and individual estate and tax planning for business owners and professionals.

Kaigler executed the balancing act of running a private practice while raising a family for 19 years before joining Jaffe Raitt Heuer & Weiss. She also returned to her alma mater, Wayne State University, in the late 1980s to get her master's in tax law "so I could be the best in my area," she says.

"I was fortunate to be able to work a flexible schedule. If I were a single parent — with a need to make a certain income — or a litigator, I would not have been able to do it. My estate planning practice made it possible for this to work for me. Once I joined Jaffe, it was easier for me to delegate tasks."

Kaigler says that running her own practice was such a gratifying learning experience that it didn't feel like work to her.

"I was able to combine actual problem solving with working with real people," she says. "The more I learned about it, the more excited I was to be the best I could be, to make it to the top of my game."

The Passion of Giving Back

Kaigler's upbringing, combined with the many community service projects she worked on through church and Delta Sigma Theta, helped to inform a career dedicated to using her talents to give back to those less fortunate.

Her civic duty frequently extends to her hometown of Detroit: Kaigler

does philanthropic work for Links, Incorporated; Detroit Institute of Arts, Detroit Symphony Orchestra, Community Foundation of Southeast Michigan and other local organizations.

In addition, she and her colleagues often do outreach work at local schools to educate the next generation of lawyers. They also mentor women new to the legal profession.

"When I started at Jaffe, I saw a lot of women who did not know how to market themselves," she says. "So we established an organization to help teach women how to promote themselves, generate business, and keep a work-life balance. That organization has existed for more than two decades now."

Her attention to mentorship is often done with the focus of getting more young people not only to consider becoming attorneys but also to consider getting involved in estate planning.

"This is an emotional area of law — not like some highly visible areas of practice that might seem more attractive to younger lawyers, such as trial work or transactions involving major deals," she says.

"There's a joy that comes with encountering people who have gone through a terrible tragedy and using the law to help them navigate challenging issues and empower them with knowledge."

Kaigler has had a number of high-profile clients — including civil rights legend Rosa Parks, whose company Kaigler was in when she passed away in 2005 — and Motown Records royalty Esther Gordy Edwards.

"She was and continues to be a blessing to our family," says Edwards' granddaughter and Motown Museum CEO Robin Terry. "We grew to love and respect her greatly for her knowledge of the law, her unwavering integrity and professionalism, and the compassion she shows for the families she serves. She is a gem."

However, Kaigler feels strongly about ensuring that people of modest means, like her father, are handled with the same amount of care and attention as those with a wealthy estate.

"He did not accumulate extraordinary wealth, but just enough to ensure that his family was well taken care of," she says of her father. "It is important to organize assets so that they benefit a family, their community and the next generation."

Kaigler has also spent much of her career doing pro bono work, including for clients in hospice care.

"I do not expect compensation when I'm doing the right thing and making a difference," she says. "I always wanted a job that was so important to me that I would do it even if I did not get paid because it's that rewarding. If you can get paid to do your life's work, then you've found the right field, and that's what estate planning is for me."

She cites a 100-year-old client whom she visits regularly, and who likes to remind Kaigler that she's aged one month every month.

"People like her need caring lawyers willing to make house calls and listen to them," she says. "That's the compassion that is necessary, and we do not have a lot of lawyers doing it."

Ira Jaffe, founding partner of Jaffe Raitt Heuer & Weiss, says Kaigler's emotional connectivity with clients separates her from her peers.

"She has everything from being a great lawyer to personally caring about the client to giving back in so many ways," Jaffe says. "There are a lot of good lawyers, but not many that take time to care about the client. She's the complete package." ■