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## Entrepreneurial attorneys venture out on their own

By LORI GABLE

What is the essence of being a true entrepreneur? For many attorneys, it is breaking away from the security of working for a large firm in order to start a new solo or small practice.

Several local lawyers have done just that at various stages of their careers.

"We thought there was a risk, but with risk comes the chance for rewards," says Patrick Solomon, a partner in the Rochester firm of Dolin, Thomas & Solomon LLP. "We had security, but there was no upside as a real entrepreneur."

Solomon and his partner, Nelson Thomas, decided to leave Rochester's largest law firm, Nixon Peabody LLP, in November 2000. At that time, both in their mid-30s, they were earning what they considered to be very good incomes. They were well-respected by their clients and peers, and they seemed to be on their way to long, lucrative careers with the firm defending large corporate clients.

But they wanted to be able to do it on their own, to choose their own cases and to have more control over what they could earn.

Today, as plaintiff attorneys representing mainly individuals in employment cases, they stand to earn more because they do not bill by the hour. When being paid by the hour, the only way to increase income is to increase hours. Instead they now bill by the case.

"Here we are paid only when we win," Thomas says. "Ninety-eight to 99 percent of our cases result with the client ending up ahead. We should be able to hit those levels because we pick the cases."

Both attorneys say it was not easy to leave Nixon, not only because they enjoyed their work there and respect the firm, but also because they were deciding to venture out at a time when it could cost them the most in lost income.

"The riskiest time to start your own practice is in your 30s," Thomas says.

"When first starting out, you're not making much, but as you get seasoned you've been working long enough to be earning a good income," Solomon adds.

Now, both Thomas and Solomon say they are earning more than what they could have made at Nixon Peabody and have no regrets in their decision to start their own practice. Thomas and Solomon are among hundreds of local attorneys who are beginning new practices. To make the transition from large firm to small practice easier, many attend special forums held by the Monroe County Bar Association.

The solo and small-firm practitioner committee meets there bi-monthly to address the issues unique to a small practice. "Solo practitioners have to work without the support provided at a large firm," explains Mary Corbitt, executive director of the Monroe County Bar Association. "They have to wear many hats, including accountant, human resources manager and secretary."

The bar association is designed to be a resource for any local law practitioner. Corbitt estimates there are roughly 3,200 attorneys in Monroe County and the surrounding area. More than 2,200 of them are members of the association. About 470 work in solo or small practices, Corbitt says. While they can enjoy the independence of owning their own practice, they may also miss the networking and support of a bigger firm.

"If you're in a large or midsize firm and have a question or need help, you can walk across the hall to ask another attorney. There's no chance to do that in a solo practice," Corbitt says.

Michael Wolford, a partner of the small practice of Wolford and Leclair LLP,

agrees. "At a large firm you have a great staff, a library, everything is handled for you. There's not much to worry about other than being a lawyer."

Wolford left Nixon Peabody in 1993. He had worked there for 21 years and always thought he had no intention of leaving. That changed as he grew older.

"Once you hit 50, you start looking back and thinking, 'Life is not a dress rehearsal,'" Wolford says.

At that point, he decided he wanted to try it on his own. At age 51, he also wanted to be in control of when he would retire.

"Once you hit 67, you may be facing retirement" at a large firm, Wolford says. "That helped me decide to leave to start my own firm."

Today, his small practice employs eight attorneys, including his daughter Elizabeth and his son James.

Wolford and Leclair mainly handles corporate work such as commercial litigation, securities work and town government representation.

One of Wolford's largest concerns in starting a new practice was where he would find his cases.

"It was a risk, a gamble. But it turns out you get work you didn't expect to get," Wolford says. "I even had some nice referrals from Nixon."

Keeping good relationships seems to be the norm for many local attorneys and the large firms they chose to leave.