

Stephen Pugh and Son Preston of Pugh Jones & Johnson



By **Dustin J. Seibert**

Like many good fathers, Stephen H. Pugh just wanted his son, Preston L. Pugh, to find his own way.

That meant not hiring Preston for his own firm, **Pugh, Jones & Johnson PC** (“PJJ”), immediately after he got his law degree. Preston struck out and made his own career in the beginning, albeit with the help and recommendation from his father and his father’s colleagues.

“I think the value of finding your own way is that you can select what you want to do for your life’s work,” Stephen says. “He could’ve gotten a very good start at my firm for a couple of reasons, but this allowed him to go out and make his own way and come back to us if it was in the cards.”

It turned out it was in the cards. Preston, 42, is now a partner of the firm that his father established in 1991

with Walter Jones, Jr. and Dennis P.W. Johnson. Preston joined the firm in 2009, 12 years into his career.

Stephen says Preston rightfully earned a seat at the table when he came aboard, but acknowledges the inherent risks of bringing his son to a firm where other shareholders might have differing opinions.

“If I had been the sole owner here, it would’ve been a different proposition,” Stephen says. “It can bring about a lot of problems among other shareholders if your son or daughter comes in and doesn’t work out.”

Preston was always on board with the idea of practicing elsewhere first because he, too, saw the risks, especially considering that Jones has been a family friend and mentor since Preston was a child in the 1970s.

“Both of the other directors will tell you they saw the risk, because if I didn’t work

out, saying ‘no’ to a family member and telling them they have to get rid of someone in their nuclear family can cause turmoil that can rock a firm of our size,” he says.

“But we’re at a time now when I’ve gotten a lot of credibility. The directors have been extremely strong supporters and have been receptive to my thoughts on things that can be done with the firm in the future.”

Stepping Stones to a Law Career

Stephen never pushed the idea of studying law on Preston, but he helped cultivate the interest when he discovered it existed.

“His mom and I wanted to make sure he picked a field he liked,” he says. “As he was growing up in late grammar school and early high school, he talked about being an architect, so that’s what I thought he wanted to do.”

It was a labor law course at Cornell University — where he was enrolled in the Industrial Labor Relations program — that motivated Preston to seriously consider law school. The spark happened around the same time Stephen, Jones and Johnson opened the firm.

“That class really turned him on academically — it made him more curious,” Stephen says. “He even tried to lecture me on labor law from time to time while he was still in undergrad!”

Getting to PJJ was the

end result of a long, winding road that was Preston’s early legal career. After finishing at New York University School of Law, he worked for the National Labor Relations Board, the civil division of the U.S. Attorney’s Office and Jenner & Block, among others.

“Are there some things I’d change about my early career? No doubt about it,” Preston says. “But my career progression was good, and it gave me a package that made me a strong lawyer and a good leader, and helps me attract business.”

Though Stephen admits Preston moved from job to job a bit more than lawyers of his generation are used to, he’s glad Preston had the wealth of experience that makes him an effective attorney for PJJ today.

“Coming to the firm when he finally did, there had to be some objectivity on behalf of the other owners,” Stephen says. “He’s a damned good lawyer, and he didn’t come on board just because he’s my son, but because he has something to add.”

Stephen also appreciates Preston’s corporate and business law background that serves the firm well.

“Many lawyers never get the opportunity to get that background, so they don’t quite understand what the in-house lawyers really go through,” he says.

Above all else, Stephen is happy Preston avoided some of the trappings he believes many black at-

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torneys have encountered working for major law firms. Stephen says he knows of several from top-flight law schools who were hired by these firms, only to be fired or to leave on their own within two or three years.

"They would say it was because of 'poor performance,' but many of those attorneys weren't mentored for success, and the extent to which they could succeed was very tenuous," Stephen says. "I wanted Preston to find his own way, learn what's out there, and make the choices for himself, but I didn't want that 'catch-and-release' thing for him."

Lessons From the Old Guard

Preston didn't learn a lot about his dad's myriad legal accomplishments until he was in college and people came up to him asking if he was related to "the" Stephen Pugh. That his father never harped on his accomplishments was one of the first law-related lessons he learned from his dad, albeit indirectly.

"Life is about a whole lot more than this law thing," Preston says. "Even though I have two daughters who are doing really well and could one day become lawyers, I understand that being their dad is about more than driving them toward some goal."

A more pragmatic lesson was Stephen's insistence that Preston work on his writing — which Preston admits wasn't stellar when he

exited law school.

"He was very honest with me about the quality of my writing, so I took the time to learn the craft, and I believe I'm much better at it now," Preston says, and Stephen affirms.

"You have to be honest with the people you love if you see them trying to achieve something but you see a roadblock in their way. Some will accept it, some won't. But he was the best man at my wedding and is my best friend, so I will accept what he has to say."

"I coached him in a fatherly way," Stephen says. "I never tried to take him down, but I didn't want him to be blindsided, either."

Preston says he's often asked about what it's like working for his father, often from peers who had the opportunity but chose not to. His response is to go into the situation knowing your relationship with your dad in advance...especially if dad is the boss.

"You need to be in a place where you know how to resolve disagreements," he says. "Can you be satisfied after the disagreement works itself out? Also, it's very important for anyone, but certainly me, that we have a buy-in to the decision even if it's one we disagree with."

"From a business point of view, the ultimate authority, when necessary, resides with myself, Walter and Dennis," Stephen says. "That goes for my son or anyone else here. It's not like there's

a fight about it. If I had that type of son, it would be a problem. But he's not that way."

One work-related lesson Stephen likes to impart to Preston actually doubles as some simple fatherly advice that would be applicable even if they didn't work together.

"He's been traveling a lot lately for business, and I try to pull his coattails and remind him that traveling can be hard on a family, so make sure you're doing it because you need to," he says. "When I look at my daughter-in-law and grandchildren, I want to make sure he's strong there."

Setting an Important Example

Moving up the ranks as a black attorney to become a partner for a Chicago firm — as Stephen did at Chapman and Cutler LLP in 1983 when he was just a couple years younger than Preston is now — was no small feat. Having seen the effects of Mayor Harold Washington's tenure and the benefits of hanging his own shingle was a primary motivator for him to start PJJ.

"One of reasons I left a big law firm is because I understand that we in the black community must have our own businesses," he says. "We must not continue to be employees solely. It's not a bad thing to be an employee — you can learn a lot and some people are more comfortable with it — but if we have the ability and de-

sire to be entrepreneurs, we must be sure to encourage that and make it flourish for the future. I'm glad my son is in the position to make that happen."

Preston says it's important for him to carry on the business for others in the family who might find the need to come on board like he did.

"I think about my daughters, and how after I'm done paying an obscene amount for their college and maybe law school, it would be great for this option to be there for them," Preston says. "But I also think about my niece and nephew who are in college now — both of them may decide to be lawyers, and that's really soon, so making sure we have something strong now and 10 years from now is important."

Though Stephen is not considering retirement anytime soon, Preston says he also recognizes the importance of carrying on Pugh Jones & Johnson from a historical perspective: With just over 20 attorneys, the firm is the largest black-founded and owned firm in Chicago.

"You look at other minority firms that pass from one generation to the next successfully — and we're talking firms that represent corporations on an everyday basis — and you certainly can't come up with a handful," Preston says. "What we're doing here is more than just for our benefit, it's historic and it hopefully will create examples for other folks around the country."