



Rita Irvin '91 (left) and Sands McKinley '90 built the region's largest family law firm.

FOUNDED BY ALUMNI, FIRM LEADS REGION IN FAMILY LAW SERVICES

There are nearly 750,000 divorces every year in the United States. More than 130,000 adoptions. Thousands of parenting plan revisions. Custody disputes. Domestic violence protection orders. Decisions about division of assets.

As a practice area, family law has tremendous potential to reach – and help – nearly everyone. The cases intimately affect people's everyday lives and struggles, which is what drew both Sands McKinley '90 and Rita Irvin '91 to the field as newly minted attorneys. It's also what keeps them working toward improvements in the level of service they offer their clients.

"Attorneys go into family law because they want to help people. They want to have that connection with clients and to feel that at the end of the day, they've done something meaningful," Irvin said. "And family law certainly is that."

Together, the married couple grew McKinley Irvin into the largest family law firm in the Pacific Northwest and one of the largest in the country. Founded in 1991, the firm now has more than 100 attorneys and staff across nine offices in Western Washington and Portland, Oregon.

"We both come from large, close-knit families, so we built our practice around a real love and respect for family," McKinley said. "We see McKinley Irvin as helping each family work through a difficult time so that we can help set them up for a positive future."

They created a firm where attorneys thrive in the field of family law by offering them mentorship, colleague collaboration, and career development.

"In all that we do, we're committed to living our mission of delivering strong advocacy and exceptional client service,

and to do so in a work environment that is collaborative and team-oriented. We mean it and live it," Irvin said, adding that attorneys regularly pitch in to help each other with hearings and deadlines and lean on each other for high-level strategy and support.

Seattle U alumni at McKinley Irvin were among the first to respond when the law school put out a call for attorney mentors to help with a pop-up clinic for domestic violence protection orders in the early days of the pandemic. Two years later, firm volunteers continue to supervise students as they work with clients on a full range of family issues.

In addition to volunteer mentors, the firm has also long supported Seattle U Law students with financial aid, offering an annual scholarship to a student interested in family law. In 2020, the firm added a second scholarship specifically for students involved in the Black Law Student Association. Each scholarship is \$5,000.

Over their three decades in family law practice, the firm's founders have noticed other areas where the profession could better serve clients – affordability, for example.

During his career, McKinley has seen too many clients struggle to pay for legal services or go without the representation they desperately needed because they couldn't afford it. As for lawyers, he said, "they simply can't sustain a healthy law practice without being paid." In response, he retired from the firm in 2020 to launch LexFin, a unique financial technology startup that provides affordable financing plans for people in need of family law legal services.

"People can get financing for almost anything, so why not when they hire a lawyer? It becomes an access to justice issue," he said. "Greater access to legal services results in more fair and just outcomes."