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## Four Dans in second careers at one firm

By Michelle Lore

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**F**our lawyers at the Minneapolis law firm of Leonard Street and Deinard have at least two things in common — they all came to the private practice of law as a second career and they all happen to be named Dan.

Meet the four Dans — Dan Palmquist, Dan Colton, Dan Oberdorfer and Dan McInerney. While their first names may be the same, their first careers were quite different:

- Palmquist worked as a chef in several restaurants in Wisconsin before opening his own in Minneapolis;
- Oberdorfer spent 12 years as a journalist at the Star Tribune;
- Colton was a geochemist; and
- McInerney worked as the deputy commissioner of the Minnesota Department of Health.

All four have their own unique story as to how they ended up in the private practice of law, and they all say that their former occupations have at least some similarities to their current one.

### A jump from journalism

**S**urrounded by journalists, it was probably inevitable that Dan Oberdorfer would enter the newspaper business. His father and many of his friends

were reporters, so, while he also had an itch to look into the law as a career, he figured he'd try his hand at reporting first.

Oberdorfer began his journalism career at his college newspaper in Michigan, then moved on to an internship with the Detroit Free Press. His next position — an internship with what was then known as the Minneapolis Tribune — took him to Minnesota. The internship turned into a regular staff position that lasted more than 12 years.

It was while covering the courts that Oberdorfer decided it was time to look into his long-held interest in the law. "I recognized that as the legal affairs reporter for the Star Tribune if I hated law school or didn't want to be a lawyer it would certainly serve me well to have at least gone through a year of law school or completed law school," he says.

Oberdorfer says the paper was good to him, allowing him to work weekends and enough odd hours during law

school to maintain his health benefits. As it turned out, he loved law school and quickly decided to make the change.

Other than a stint as a clerk for 8th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals Judge Donald Lay, Oberdorfer has been working as an employment lawyer with Leonard Street since his graduation from the University of Minnesota Law School in 1992.

He says there are similarities between his two careers — both involve gathering information, processing it and communicating it to others in a digestible format, hopefully in the form of a compelling tale. "Those are the building blocks of being a journalist and the building blocks of being a lawyer," he says.

On the other hand, as a lawyer you represent a client and have a point of view but as a journalist you strive not to have a point of view, Oberdorfer notes.

Another difference, he adds, is that as a lawyer at a large firm, he has a lot of support — a secretary, paralegals and access to a team of other attorneys. His experience as a journalist, however, is that with few exceptions, you tend to be "a sole operator."

### What's cooking?

**D**an Palmquist says he cooked his way through college. But he actually

# A wide-ranging group

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began his culinary career in high school, working in restaurants in the Milwaukee area where he grew up.

As an English Linguistics and Spanish major at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, Palmquist got more serious about cooking, securing a job at a French restaurant where he worked under some classically trained chefs. Several years later, he and a business partner opened their own restaurant, Chez Bananas in Minneapolis. He set up the kitchen, hired staff, designed half the menu and worked as a cook.



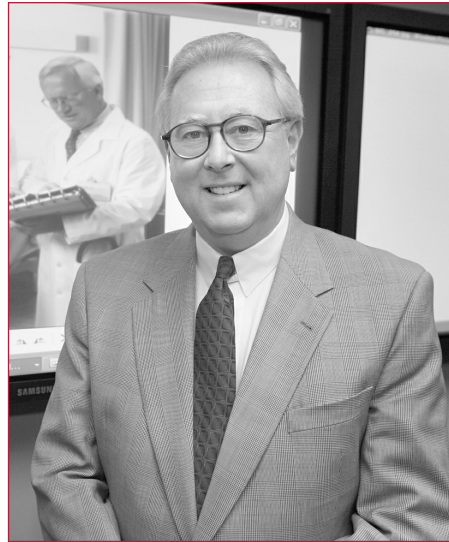
Prior to becoming a lawyer in the science and tech-law areas, Dan Colton, pictured here holding tungsten ore, worked as a geochemist on projects all over the country.

Palmquist says he seriously considered going to the Culinary Institute in New York to become a chef, but also looked at going into law or academia.

“I pulled the trigger on law school in the fall of 1988,” he says. “My decision was ultimately based on my feeling that I wanted the intellectual challenge of a law practice.”

As a law student, Palmquist remained active with Chez Bananas, working part-time on weekends. Once he graduated, however, his role dwindled primarily to cooking for special occasions and an annual Spanish tapas dinner.

Other than a clerkship with Minnesota Supreme Court Judge Lawrence Yetka,



Before entering private practice, Dan McInerney served in various capacities with the Minnesota Department of Health, most recently as deputy commissioner.

## LEONARD STREET AND DEINARD

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Dan Palmquist has cooked in restaurants in Wisconsin and Minnesota, and considered going to culinary school before deciding to go into the law instead. (Photos: Bill Klotz)

Palmquist has spent his entire legal career at Leonard Street, working primarily in the areas of employment and immigration law. He says that surprisingly, there is some crossover between cooking and practicing law.

“There is a certain amount of performance in the law and there is a certain amount of performance in cooking,” he says. “I think there are similar stresses, although obviously, they are different in the kinds of problems you are solving. But you work under a great degree of pressure — sometimes under a lot of heat — in both,” he quipped.

### Blinded by science

As a geochemist in the mid-to-late 1980s, Dan Colton conducted mineral



Dan Oberdorfer worked as a journalist for the Star Tribune for 12 years before deciding to go to law school.

exploration studies and provided environmental compliance consulting on projects all over the country. At the time, people were just starting to think about cleaning up dirty soil and groundwater.

“I’ve dealt with a lot of high-level nuclear waste issues, transuranic waste issues, as well as soil and groundwater cleanup on a technical level,” he says.

But this Dan had an even greater plan, and that was to eventually go to law school. He liked the idea of getting a technical degree, working for a while and then combining that with the law. “I just liked the idea of creating this niche,” he says.

# All four Dans say they are happy where they are, plan no “third” vocation

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Colton’s plan was reinforced while working as a geochemist; he worked with a lot of lawyers on environmental projects, coming to grips with how to clean dirt and soil, deciding how to remediate groundwater and figuring out the proper standards to follow.

“This was just a new field both legally and technically,” he says. “We really were on the forefront. ... The laws had just been promulgated in 1980. It takes years for the regulations to be developed to the point they have teeth and people are actually implementing the regulations called for by the statutes.”

After being admitted to the bar in 1990, Colton spent a year as in-house counsel for an environmental engineering firm in Albuquerque before deciding that he’d rather be practicing law in Minneapolis. He joined Leonard Street and has been handling science and technology-related legal issues ever since, both in litigation and business and regulatory transactions.

Colton says his background as a geochemist has been an enormous help to him in his law practice, particularly because lawyers and scientists tend to speak different languages and have different thought-processes on how to evaluate things. His training, however, allows him to confidently and effectively communicate with scientific and technical experts — on both sides of a case.

“I can sit down with an expert and maximize that expert’s contribution to a case, whether it’s putting a case together or dismantling an opponent’s case,” he says.

## A healthy dose of law

**D**an McNerney took a little different path to his second career as a private practitioner. He attended law school immediately after college, but rather than go into the law right away, got a master’s degree in public health. He then went the administrative agency route, taking a job preparing regulatory codes for the Minnesota Department of Health.

“I had had an interest since high school in medical care policy,” he says. “And I was interested in using my law degree as a government lawyer, not so much as a litigator but as a person who had responsibility for creating and modifying and administering public policy.”

Over the next 16 years, McNerney held various positions within the health department, including in-house lawyer, assistant commissioner and deputy commissioner/chief operating officer. He left the department in 1991 following the election of Gov. Arne Carlson and has been with Leonard Street ever since.


“The practical options for me were to go in-house with a health organization or a trade association representing health-care interests, or private prac-

tice,” he says. “I thought that private practice sounded interesting.”

As a corporate lawyer in the health law area, McNerney now represents a broad range of players in the health-care industry — hospitals, nursing homes, HMOs and large clinics — in mergers, acquisitions, dispositions and joint ventures. He says that his experience with the health department has been immensely beneficial to his current law practice.

First, he has a clear understanding of how the healthcare system works. Second and more important, he says, is that his clients are subject to so many different bodies of regulation that to represent them properly he needs to be familiar with the regulations and be able to integrate them into the advice that he gives with respect to what might otherwise be a general corporate transaction.

“Understanding those bodies of administrative law helps me represent those clients more effectively and helps me put together arrangements for them that comply with the law,” McNerney says. “I think the public law knowledge makes me a better private lawyer than perhaps I otherwise would have been.”

All four of Leonard Street’s second-career Dans say they are happy in their current positions and have no plans for a “third” vocation. 

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