

## Saeks has focused on loyalty, service, history in long career

**BY HENRY BREIMHURST**  
CONTRIBUTING WRITER

Few lawyers entering the field today will have the career Allen Saeks has had. If you're not one of them, don't be too hard on yourself: The market for septuagenarian legal legends with a half-century at one firm who influence the national legal landscape, tirelessly promote altruistic values in the profession and still find time to stand before the bench is somewhat limited.

Of course, when Saeks started with Minneapolis-based Leonard, Street and Dienard, spending a lifetime at one firm wasn't the exception, it was the rule.

"I never thought about leaving. I've been very happy here," Saeks said. And, he noted, the attitude wasn't just his, as he rattled off a list of former colleagues who worked at the firm until late retirement or death.

But don't mistake Saeks for one of those old-timers who hangs on as a kind of figurehead, lamenting the good old days that are gone forever. True, Allen Saeks has been there, seen that and done it all. He still has places to go, people to see and things to do.

Saeks graduated from the University of Minnesota Law School in 1956. His senior year, he clerked for a Minnesota Supreme Court justice. After graduating, he took a position in the U.S. Attorney's Office working criminal cases.

A draft notice marked the next phase of his career. Saeks was able to parlay his law degree into an officer commission and training at the Army's JAG (Judge Advocate General's Corps) school, which led to work at the Pentagon arguing on the government's behalf in major criminal cases involving service members.

His next move, employer-wise, would carry him for the next five decades plus.

As he was looking for that next move, "Leonard, Street and Dienard were about to go into a serious criminal case" related to



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**After stints with the U.S. Attorney's Office, the Army JAG and the Pentagon, Allen Saeks landed at a Twin Cities law firm where he spent the next 50 years.**

the dismantling of the Minneapolis streetcar system, Saeks said. "I was a good fill-in. I was the ninth employee."

In the intervening decades, as the firm went from nine to nearly 200 employees, Saeks' legal repertoire grew. He became involved in white-collar criminal cases and anti-trust cases, and in the late '80s became involved in the trend of alternative dispute resolution, where cases are resolved outside the courts through mediation.

As the cases changed, so too did the culture at law firms, which for years had been, in Saeks' words, "firm families," where people tended to stay put. Their services became commoditized, and lawyers started to get poached to fill gaps in a firm and keep clients sated.

"In the late '80s or early '90s, lateralling [lawyers moving from firm to firm] became the name of the game," said Tom Nelson, shareholder at Leonard, Street and Dienard and a colleague of Saeks' for the past 13 years. "That was real challenging in terms of culture. Allen's response has been to be especially loyal to the firm's roots and history. He brings the past to the present, to guide the future."

History has been an important element to Saeks in many ways. He was one of the co-founders of the Minnesota Supreme Court Historical Society, and is quick with anecdotes about his firm's esteemed founders, making a point to show their portraits in one of the conference rooms.

He is working on a display of the firm's

history to be installed in the lobby, complete with important papers, artifacts and exposition.

But the points he takes from those anecdotes and historical references tend to be more timeless than nostalgic, focusing less on the way things were and more on how he'd like things to be.

A key issue that comes up time and again is service to the community. Saeks noted the importance that ideal has played in his firm, and is proud of its history of service and support of its lawyers in pro bono and service work.

One of Saeks' most recognized contributions was the major role he played in making IOLTA (Interest on Lawyer Trust Accounts) mandatory in Minnesota in the early 1980s; this requires law firms to keep entrusted funds in interest-bearing bank accounts and donate the proceeds to legal aid charities.

Minnesota was one of the first states to make IOLTA mandatory, a policy now standard in most states.

Jeremy Lane, executive director of Mid-Minnesota Legal Assistance, has been one

of Saeks' frequent beneficiaries, from IOLTA funds to fundraising efforts to getting Leonard, Street and Dienard to sponsor a legal fellowship with the nonprofit.

"I'm eligible for Social Security, and he's *still* my role model," Lane said. "I have run out of things to ask him for."

To Saeks, community service is part of being a lawyer, a point he underscores in his histories and his own personal example. "Part of our code of ethics is to serve people who can't afford our services."

So what comes next for the legal veteran?

"I probably should stop trying cases," Saeks admitted. "It's very unusual to do that at my age. [But] I seem to get cases with interesting issues — or at least I make them interesting."

Lane has no worries about what comes next for Saeks.

"If he ever does transition to something resembling retirement, the example he has set will be alive and well."

**Henry Breimhurst** is a freelance writer.

## ALLEN SAEKS

**Shareholder, Leonard, Street and Dienard**

Time at firm: **50 years**

Age: **77**

Education: **Bachelor of science at law, 1954, University of Minnesota; juris doctorate, 1956, U of M Law School**

### Three interesting cases from Allen Saeks:

**"In the early 1960s**, was able to make a client of modest means one of the richest men in Azusa, Calif., by showing that the client had been born in 1912 as the son of a well-known deceased member of a prominent St. Paul family through a common law marriage recognized in Minnesota prior to 1946."

**"In 2001, recovered for a client** in a Florida Federal Court an \$8.5 million award for fraud and racketeering that was later found not to be dischargeable in the defendant's bankruptcy."

**"Through a lawsuit on behalf** of a child injured in a fall by the shattered glass screen of an Etch A Sketch drawing toy, was able to get the manufacturer to permanently change the glass screen of the toy to plastic, thereby preventing any future injuries to children." ■

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