

Josh Humbrecht

The Younger Half of Mt. Vernon's Top PI and Work Comp Law Firm

by Lauren Duncan

MOUNT VERNON — If you ask longtime attorney Mark D. Hassakis how he got paired up with young lawyer Joshua A. Humbrecht, he'll tell you it was luck.

About eight years ago, Hassakis was giving a presentation at Southern Illinois University School of Law when he asked a woman there if she knew of any smart, hardworking students who wished to enter a civil trial litigation practice in southern Illinois. She gave Hassakis one name.

The woman told Hassakis about Humbrecht: "This guy might do the trick."

Today, the two lawyers are partners who represent clients around the state from their Mt. Vernon office at **Hassakis & Hassakis, P.C.**

"We frankly got extremely lucky,"

Hassakis says. "I got lucky, the firm got lucky, the region got lucky."

Humbrecht, 33, is a native of New Lenox, a village in Will County. His journey into a legal career has been filled with a little bit of happenstance and a lot of hard work.

His path to becoming a lawyer dates back to the eighth grade when he was nominated as the student in his class who was most likely to one day become an attorney. That label might have been the result of his tendency to argue with teachers. But Humbrecht also credits his family role as the youngest of four siblings: He had to learn how to defend himself early in life.

He attended Illinois State University, where he double majored in history and

political science, at which point his parents recommended he give law school a try. Humbrecht chose SIU not only because it was closer to ideal rock climbing sites throughout the Shawnee National Forest, but also because it would put a bit of distance between him and distractions back home near Chicago.

Little did Humbrecht know when he arrived at SIU that it would turn him into a southern Illinois resident for the long run.

Humbrecht was uncertain about how law school would pan out until his first semester finals placed him near the top of his class. At that point, he was ready to fully commit to becoming an attorney.

While in school, Humbrecht worked for a small family law firm when he realized



family law wasn't for him. He also clerked for Fifth District Appellate Judge Stephen L. Spomer before the stars aligned and he began clerking for Hassakis.

Humbrecht was invited to work on the school's law journal, but he opted instead for some hands-on experience working at a firm. Despite being among the top students in his class, Humbrecht figured he could use the mentorship gained through being a clerk while in school. Unlike many of his peers, he did not have a parent who was an attorney.

Humbrecht did have a grandfather who was an attorney — Nathan Humbrecht — but the senior Humbrecht passed away at a young age, and Josh never got to meet him.

After he began working with Hassakis, however, Humbrecht discovered that his grandfather and Hassakis' father had gone to law school together. Humbrecht found U of I law journal articles authored by his grandfather in Hassakis' Mt. Vernon office, which almost made their partnership seem like fate.

As Humbrecht neared law school graduation, he explored his options. He had initially looked at joining a large defense firm, but thanks in part to the market crash around the time of his graduation, nothing worked out. Looking back, he says, he "knew nothing then."

"Now I know, and I'm so happy I do what I do," he says.

An Early Start

It also made sense for Humbrecht to join the Hassakis firm because he had clerked there.

"Having been in this firm for two years just as a clerk, I had a great idea of how the firm functioned, of how to handle these cases, basically how to get them done start to finish, so it wasn't like I walked into my first legal job blind," he says.

Immediately upon graduating law school in 2009, Hassakis hired Humbrecht. It was likely a good time for Hassakis to choose a teammate. He had been working solo for many years. One year after Humbrecht joined, Hassakis was named the president of the Illinois State Bar Association. It proved helpful to have another attorney at the office amid his added time constraints.

Humbrecht was put to work trying cases right out of school, which was intimidating for him at age 26. He was the lead attorney on two cases back-to-back after joining the firm full-time.

"There were days when it was frustrating, but it was also very helpful to me," he says. "It forced me to learn a lot, it forced me to get comfortable in my own skin...it basically made me mature as a lawyer faster

than I think I would have otherwise."

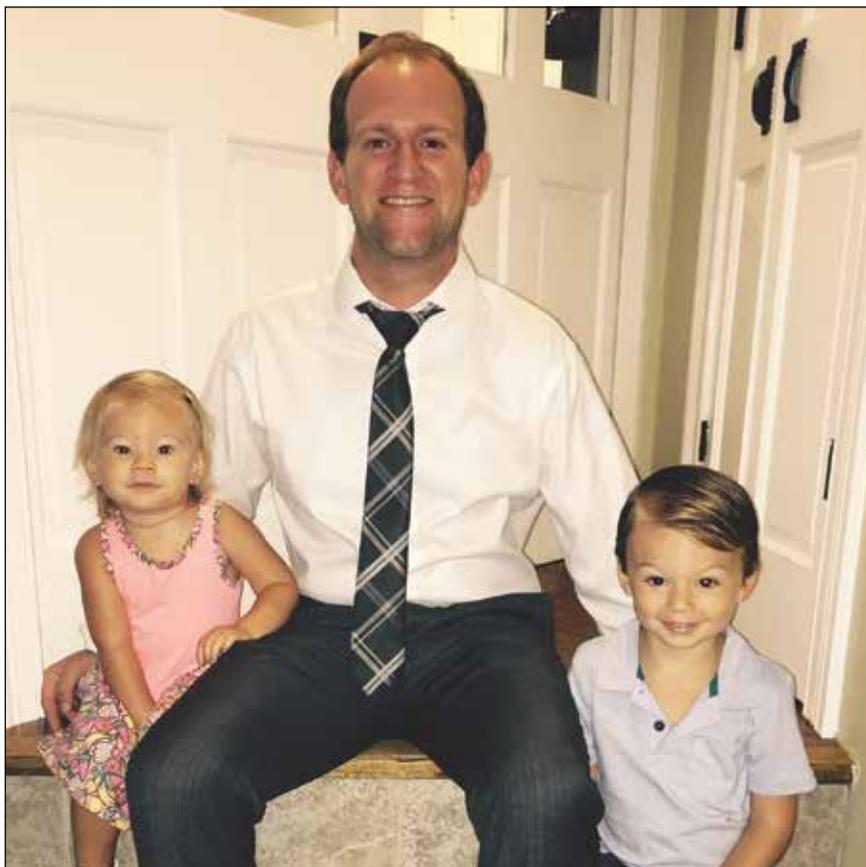
In addition to the forced maturity that came with working somewhat independently and with a lot of responsibility early on, Humbrecht also quickly developed a greater appreciation for personal injury law. Looking back, he

says, it is difficult to imagine working in any other area of law.

"I love the plaintiff's side of what's here," he says. "It is a David and Goliath-esque situation that we're all in as plaintiff's attorneys. There's a little man-big man mentality that's in this...I enjoy nothing



From left: son Caden William, Humbrecht, daughter Ella Rose and wife Monika Rose at Brookfield Zoo in August 2016



From left: daughter Ella Rose, 2, Humbrecht, son Caden William, 3, at home on Caden's first day of preschool

more than the underdog story.”

Winning cases while representing the underdogs also makes work rewarding. Early in his career at the firm, Humbrecht appealed and argued a workers’ compensation case in front of the Illinois Appellate Court. In a 3-2 decision, he convinced the court to overturn an earlier decision denying a claim. In that particular case, Humbrecht wasn’t expecting the favorable result.

While winning helps, Humbrecht says much of his career growth comes from another source: becoming more comfortable being himself in the courtroom setting.

He recalls a defense attorney once pointing out to him that “You are who you are, and you are going to present who you are.” Humbrecht has since realized that advice goes against some of the teachings in law school in which students are encouraged to be very formal in their presentation.

“Getting that it’s OK to just be who you are helped me tremendously,” he says. “It definitely changed how I needed to act or present in courtrooms, to not feel as formal, to not feel as rehearsed, to just be yourself. Juries know. It’s unnatural to not be yourself.”

Yet another way in which Humbrecht has grown involves speaking his mind. One of his goals in working with clients is to be direct and straightforward, which helps gain trust with clients, he says.

“I tell clients — usually the first time they meet me — that I tend to be very blunt, but I talk to you in a way that I’d want to be talked to. I don’t want somebody making me feel good about a situation that’s not good. I give them my honest opinion about things,” he adds.

Relatable Representation

Humbrecht says he’s had clients tell him they’re glad he doesn’t talk to them “like a lawyer.”

One of those clients is Amanda Miller, whose name has been changed in this story to keep her identity confidential. Humbrecht helped her settle a case in mid-2016.

In 2013, Miller was driving a company vehicle for a private school she worked for when she was rear-ended. Her employer later let her go, and she was unable to receive workers’ compensation despite having a continued shoulder injury from the collision.

Before that, her husband had also been injured in a work incident, which Miller says left him permanently disabled. Her husband had a bad experience with an attorney in the case, which left the couple with a strong distaste for lawyers.

But Miller says she had to seek help after

she was injured.

“I really didn’t want to do it, but I had to get a lawyer,” she says.

Miller, of Murphysboro, didn’t want to hire someone local, so she got out the phone book, dropped her finger on a page, and it landed on Hassakis & Hassakis.

From the moment she called the firm and first spoke to Humbrecht, Miller immediately felt secure.

“He made everything seem like it was supposed to fall into place. And if I was confused about something, he explained it to me in lay terms, not in attorney terms. He explained everything to where I understood it, and if I didn’t, he would explain it again. He never made me feel stupid, he never made me feel belittled, he never made me feel like he didn’t care how I was feeling,” Miller says.

Miller says her family was about to lose their home before they received a settlement in the summer of 2016 that was “more than what I ever thought I was going to get.”

While the settlement helped, she notes that Humbrecht’s willingness to reach out to her with updates about her case and his ability to put up with some of the people involved in the matter took “all of the stress away from me.”

“I just felt like I was at a no-end situation...but God is good, and he sends you what you can handle, and he knew what I could handle and that was Josh,” Miller says. “He is going to go so far with his career because he’s just that kind of a good human being.”

Being able to help clients like Miller is ultimately why Humbrecht finds his work rewarding.

“Being able to help people clean that mess up, put their life back on track, and hopefully with some amount of recovery in their pocket to offset what harm has been caused to them, there is a ton of self-value in that,” he says.

Keeping It Professional

While clients know Humbrecht as someone who helps take the burden off them in their cases, at least one of his colleagues on the opposite side of the aisle knows him as being tough to compete against.

D. Brian Smith, a defense attorney with Feirich/Mager/Green/Ryan of Carbondale, has tried several cases against Humbrecht over the past six years or so.

Smith says if he had to choose someone to face in workers’ compensation cases, it would be Humbrecht, but not because he’s easy.

“He is a good blend of aggressive

representation and professionalism,” Smith says. “When I have a case against Josh, I know two things. One, he is going to fight hard on every issue. There are going to be no ‘gimmies’ with him, he is going to make me earn it from the defense perspective, every time on every issue. Two, he’s going to do it in a professional way. He’s going to play it in a straight-up, ethical way.

“There’s nothing easy against Josh, but at the same time there’s never anything unfair,” Smith explains, “and I don’t know how you would represent an injured worker better than that.”

Hassakis likewise cites Humbrecht’s professionalism as something that’s helped him further both his own career and his client’s cases.

Hassakis had been examining the future of his practice, possibly including merging, before he found Humbrecht.

But instead, today the firm is growing.

“He’s been just wonderful to watch,” says Hassakis, who has been practicing for 40 years. “He has an extremely bright future.”

Hassakis says the two have a working relationship where they don’t often need to have meetings because they’re always on the same page, which helps the firm operate efficiently.

He also knows Humbrecht has that spark of a determined attorney who cares about his clients.

“When he sees something that’s wrong, he’ll get a little fired up for the client’s benefit,” he says. “That’s a good trait. You’ve got to keep your professionalism, but it definitely shows you’ve got the passion for the client and you’ve got the client’s interest at heart all the time, number one. He knows it, and I know it, whether it’s a big case or a small case.”

Outside of his daily work, Humbrecht is a member of the Illinois Trial Lawyers Association and currently serves on the Illinois State Bar Association Tort Law Section Council and Workers’ Compensation Law Section Council. He was formerly president of the Jefferson County Bar Association.

Humbrecht and his wife, Monika, live in Benton. They have two children, son Caden, 3, and daughter Ella Rose, 1. A third child is on the way.

While he’s put quite a bit of hard work into his practice, Humbrecht says his parents and wife have been “wonderful mentors and supporters” who have been vital to helping him pursue and shape his career. ■