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Family Forward

Longtime colleagues have launched a new civil litigation venture, Schonbuch Hallissy LLP



Michael Schonbuch and Erin Hallissy

Longtime trial attorney Michael N. Schonbuch never misses a day at the gym.

"I am a diehard weightlifter and bodybuilder; I work out every single day, seven days a week," Schonbuch said, adding that he doesn't drink any alcohol or caffeine and doesn't smoke or use any drugs.

"I try to stay really healthy and full of massive amounts of energy, and I think that really helps as a trial lawyer because doing jury trials is a marathon, not a sprint," Schonbuch continued. "As trials go on - and some of them are very long:

four weeks, five weeks, six weeks, eight weeks, 10 weeks, 12 weeks - I find a lot of my opposing lawyers start to ... lose energy over that long time period where I have just as much energy on day 40 as I do on day one because I maintain the same routine seven days a week - even on the weekend, getting up in the fours and going to the gym no matter what."

A 1990 Boston University School of Law graduate, Schonbuch said he started tackling jury trials early at what was then Daniels, Baratta and Fine LLP, where Schonbuch later became a name partner as that shop grew and evolved.

Schonbuch spent nearly a quarter century, in fact, working at that same firm prior to early May of this year, when he and roughly 20 of the shop's other lawyers decided to strike out together and launch Schonbuch Hallissy LLP in Brentwood. Schonbuch said that decision was spurred, in part, by the lease ending at the old firm's location earlier this spring.

"Some people did leave; some people were not asked to join. But for the most part, I would say the majority of the old firm came here and joined us," Schonbuch explained. "It's reformed in terms of, obviously, a new location, new name, new ownership, new management, new website, new email. ... Everything's completely different, but many of the people are the same."

Schonbuch described teaming up with longtime partner Erin O. Hallissy as an easy decision.

"I always say that we're like brother and sister," Schonbuch explained, noting the two have been working together since the early 90s. "She's a phenomenal person, she's a phenomenal lawyer and I thought that of all people she would be the person I would want to start this project with."

A 1994 McGeorge School of Law graduate, Hallissy also used that brother-and-sister comparison to describe her relationship with Schonbuch.

"We've worked together for so long," she said. "Our spouses are friends. Our kids are born within a year of each other. That's one of the things we promote - we have a very family-oriented type of firm."

Predominantly handling defense work, Schonbuch Hallissy focuses on representing clients in court.

"The thing that makes us different than everyone else is the fact that we concentrate on the jury trials," Schonbuch said. "And that we're frequently brought in to try cases after other attorneys realize the case is not going to resolve or settle, so we get brought in for the trial."

Earlier in his career, Schonbuch represented big names like Johnny Depp, Arnold Schwarzenegger, Ozzy Osbourne and Lil Wayne, but he said he grew tired of representing celebrity clients in hush-hush matters that usually settled. Hoping to spend more time in front of juries, the longtime litigator shifted gears.

"I started focusing more on cases that are going to trial, and that leads you to catastrophic injury cases, employment cases," Schonbuch said. "If you want to go to trial and be a civil trial lawyer, and you want to do a lot of trials, this is the area where the action is."

Schonbuch represented a Century City dentist at trial in 2022 in a breach of contract and misappropriation of trade secrets case, involving a one-time employee accused of funneling patients to a competing dental office. In June of 2022, a Los Angeles County jury awarded Schonbuch's client in that matter just over \$2 million, a verdict that featured awards of more than \$850,000 for unjust enrichment and punitive damages along with more than \$900,000 in attorney fees. *Dorfman v. Cantor* BC602388 (L.A. Super. Ct., filed Nov. 25, 2015).

"And on [the former employee's] cross complaint on all the employment claims - there were 70 something questions on the verdict form - the jury found in favor of us on every single question," Schonbuch said. "So it was a double win on both sides."

Los Angeles trial attorney Brian J. Panish has opposed both Schonbuch and Hallissy on several different cases over the years and has seen both attorneys argue in court.

"They do a great job representing their clients and looking for solutions to problems that they deal with - whether it's to get the case resolved or to take the case to trial and vindicate their clients," Panish said. "I think they're a good yin and yang. ... I think their strengths really complement one another."

Hallissy agreed.

"I think we're a good balance," she said. "Mike is a very big personality - larger than life - and I'm much more subdued. But I'm the mother of the firm. ... I'm much more willing to stay in the firm and help take care of everyone and everything."

Hallissy also noted that the newly launched shop is looking to grow.

"We're actively hiring, trying to find more attorneys," she said. "It's a good problem to have, but right now, we have more work than we have lawyers."

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