Sandra Clapp

Sandra Clapp and Associates

As an Idaho native, Sandra Clapp opened her Eagle, Idaho, law practice in 2004, focusing on estate and business planning, estate administration, commercial transactions, taxation and trusts. She's received multiple awards for her work, and her seven-person firm serves the greater Boise metro area.

Growing Up

Clapp, the eldest of three siblings, grew up in Franklin County. She was the first in her family to attend college, and credits her father, an auto parts salesman, for encouraging her to pursue a higher education. "He knew I'd have more opportunities in life if I went to college, so he emphasized going to school and bettering myself," she says. "In the community where I was raised, most women stay home and raise children, which is fine, I highly respect that choice. But I didn't want that to be my path." After she finished school and went to University of Idaho, her father went on to run for county assessor and served three terms. "It was a testament to his character that he was a Democrat elected in a mostly Republican county," she says.

Going into Law

Clapp's path toward practicing law began as a contestant for Miss Franklin County. "We needed to include career aspirations," she recalls, "and since the law sounded interesting to me, that's what I put down." And she won. After that, the seemingly random choice became a reality. "My major was history, so I knew I'd either go into teaching or law," she says.

Years later, there was a 50-year reunion of all those crowned Miss Franklin County, and Clapp was one of only two who'd pursued a professional career.

Following law school, she clerked with Judge Steven Trott on the 9th Circuit Court of Appeals. "As a young associate, I completed whatever task or research was assigned to me," she says. "In the early to mid-'90s, I began focusing on entity formation when the LLC laws became a popular alternative. I always did some estate planning, but from the mid-'90s forward, when I was an associate attorney at Holland & Hart, I did nothing but estate planning, business planning and related administration.

"I was working on the administration of some very large estates," she continues. "I liked that area because it was more like a puzzle than a fight. In litigation, it was very stressful and unpredictable. I still end up being involved in estate and trust litigation, but the majority of my practice focuses on planning and helping families navigate death or incapacity events. Most of the time, we can avoid dispute, so it's rewarding to help during those stressful and important times."

She later became a partner with Elam & Burke. "The late Carl Burke was a gentleman to the core," she says. "He was a shining example of civility in the law, which is, unfortunately, being eroded. I worked with Trudy Fouser and Bobbi Dominick there as well; they were amazing ladies who juggled successful careers and families and maintained a sense of humor. This was an important example for me as a young mother."

Following that, she formed a small firm called Spink, Butler, Clapp. In 2004, she opened Sandra Clapp & Associates.

Building a Practice

"When I started my business, I brought a receptionist and a paralegal secretary with me," says Clapp. "I was running the business and that was OK because I needed to figure it out. I needed to know how it worked. After about a year, I realized the administrative component wasn't where my time was best spent—so I hired my husband," she says. "I like to employ family. I know it doesn't always work, but a lot of my staff are family [including her daughter, son, sister and husband]. I feel like as long as the ground rules are set from the beginning, it can be a positive relationship.

"There are employees who aren't family and I don't want them to feel the family members are privileged or treated differently. It's important to create expectations for everybody and to hold them accountable," she adds.

At first, they were renting office space, but Clapp knew she wanted her own building. "I partnered with David Johnson, my accountant at the time, to buy a space where we could build. I had to take out a line of credit to do so, which was a risk, but I felt it was the right thing to do. We're still partners today in the space," she says.

Clapp emphasizes the importance of how clients are treated. "I want that person calling to feel like they're the most important person in the world," she says. "Everyone is treated the same, whether they're clients or staff."

It's a system that works on many levels. And it makes sense that the business is focused on helping families feel comfortable during stressful times and helping them plan for their futures. Some situations can be very difficult when it comes to family dynamics, and Clapp stresses the importance of reading between the lines.

"A trust that was written 10 or 15 years ago may no longer be appropriate," she says. "The biggest key is choosing the right person to be in charge. The personal representative or power of attorney is the biggest indicator of success or failure. If that person isn't diligent or is self-motivated or heavy-handed, the estate can fall into shambles.

"It's important for us to communicate with the family regarding expectations so there isn't a surprise. Disclosure and discussion have to be done on a case-by-case basis. But it doesn't have to be complicated," she continues. "I always call it the 'road map' that can be put in place by the right person. It doesn't have to be the oldest sibling. Everybody has their strengths and weaknesses."

She points out it's not a good idea to appoint more than one person to be in charge, especially if they haven't gotten along in the past. "If they don't get along, this situation will escalate that," she says. "I try to read between the lines of people's concerns and to provide options. If I pick up on something that's of concern to the client, I try to get them to talk about it, so we can discuss it and come up with the best solution for everyone."

Another common factor is that people often fail to consider change. If there's a marriage, divorce or death in the family, the documents are affected. "It's important to review and update documents regularly," she says.

Being a Woman in Business

"The practice of law is very much male dominated," says Clapp. "I often feel like I have to perform 50 times better, particularly in a courtroom." This goes for clients as well. "I think being female has to be evaluated in any legal situation, whether you're the attorney or the client," she says.

"I still sometimes get the, 'Boy, you look really pretty today' from opposing counsel, and I end up thinking, 'Thank you, but I don't think about coming in to say you look really handsome today.'

> "I feel I've been good as an employer and have hopefully given my team a good life."

"There are also situations when I feel like my older male clients don't believe what I'm telling them," she continues. "Sometimes that relationship won't work because they're not willing to respect what I say. I build respect by being competent and prepared. With younger people, being disrespected doesn't happen as much, and I think it's because many were raised with both parents working."

Succession Planning

Clapp began her succession plan from the very beginning. "When I was sole proprietor, I was the only attorney in the office, so I created a contract with another attorney where if something happened to me contractually, they agreed to step in and handle client files to make sure nothing fell through the cracks," she says. "As I've added attorneys, the plan is internal. But it has to evolve, because at this point, I think probably in the next five years, my oldest daughter will reach a point where she can take over when the time is right."

She points out that any business going through succession planning should focus on recognizing who can take over and analyzing if they can take on the risk. "Could that person manage people? There may not be anyone in the organization who is capable. So, then the question is whether to train someone, or train a group. Then, a business owner has to be willing to delegate and start that process and that may bring up non-compete agreements because when trade secrets are revealed, you're opening up the potential for competition," she says. "Most business owners have control issues, which complicates succession planning. But it goes back to the idea of identifying what you're good at, as well as the strengths of others."

Return on Investment

Clapp is fortunate, in that she gets to work on the things that interest her most. She's also happy to have created a good workplace. "I have staff with me who've been here for 15 years. I feel I've been good to them as an employer and have hopefully given them a good life."

When it comes to her personal experience, she notes rewards come in all sorts of forms. "I enjoy helping families," she says. "I get paid for practicing the part of the law that's interesting to me; it's engaging every day. I'd go crazy doing the same job every day. I like the diversity, the challenges, and especially when clients call to say, 'Thank you so much for everything you did.'

"Sometimes the outcome isn't what they wanted, but they're still appreciative for having a voice in the process. The legal system is intimidating for the layperson. I want the experience—whether it's basic planning or a family dispute—to be respectful so people can talk about concerns and I can answer their questions in a way that helps them through everything. And there's nothing more rewarding than a wonderful success."