

# BILL BRINKMANN

## The Doctors' Ally in Champaign

by Elisabeth Kilpatrick

William J. Brinkmann may be a Chicago native, but for him, there's no place like Champaign.

"It's a wonderful city," he says from his law offices at **Thomas, Mamer and Haughey LLP**. "It has most of the benefits of a big city, and not so many of the disadvantages in terms of traffic, things of that nature. It's a wonderful place to live and raise a family."

Brinkmann would know. He's lived in Champaign since 1966, when he moved there to attend college and then law school at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

He started clerking at Thomas, Mamer and Haughey in the early 1970s as a law student and is now a senior partner with the firm.

Through his work representing defendants in medical malpractice suits, Brinkmann has carved out a local reputation as a tough-minded yet exceedingly fair attorney.

"He's the most formidable opponent I've come across," says Jim Spiros, a Danville-based plaintiff's attorney who works opposite Brinkmann often. "He's one of the members of the bar we all learn from."

Brinkmann's legal success today is something he never imagined as a child. Growing up near Chicago's Wrigley Field, the only lawyer he knew was his uncle, who was counsel to the local meatcutters union.

After visiting three Illinois colleges, Brinkmann chose the University of Illinois, charmed by the campus and the town. Though he majored in business administration, he dabbled in pre-law classes and found he enjoyed the coursework. When graduation rolled around, pragmatism took over.

"The job market was not very good, (so) I decided to get my MBA or attend law school," Brinkmann says. "I did a little better on the LSAT."

Before he could begin law studies, though, military duty called. Brinkmann signed up for the Marine Corps Reserves, and spent most of 1970 and 1971 at California's Camp Pendleton. It's the only time he's lived outside of Champaign in the past 42 years.

"This was in the midst of the Vietnam War, so you kind of had to do it one way or another," he explains. "This seemed like the best option."

Once his military stint was up, Brinkmann eagerly returned to Champaign and entered University of Illinois' law class of 1974. In a nod to his undergraduate business major, he took "every tax class that was offered" but also found himself increasingly interested in trial courses. He signed up for the school's moot court team, which traveled the Midwest staging appellate court cases on topics like constitutional law and free speech.

"It's a competitive-type exercise, which I enjoy," Brinkmann says. "That really drew me to pursue litigation after law school."

### A Mentoring in Medical Malpractice

Brinkmann had a head start on a career in litigation by the time law school graduation rolled around. He had spent most of his time clerking at Thomas, Mamer and Haughey in litigation, so the firm put him to work as a litigator the moment he became an associate. His concentration in medical malpractice came courtesy of his mentor, George Miller.

"The law firm has represented hospitals and medical clinics for years," Brinkmann explains. "I learned a lot from working with George."

Miller encouraged Brinkmann to learn by doing, toting him along to complex depositions and occasionally letting the young associate take second chair in trials with him.



"He would show me, rather than tell me," Brinkmann says.

After Miller left the firm to become a circuit court judge in 1980, Brinkmann, a newly-minted partner, took over his case load.

"We've actually expanded the practice," Brinkmann says of the firm's medical malpractice work. "We've had good success in that area."

Brinkmann credits the small firm with fostering his independence by encouraging him to find his own interests, develop a career plan and recruit new clients. Thomas, Mamer and Haughey has grown to 18 attorneys today, but Brinkmann says the "collegial atmosphere" present when he began there remains strong.

"There's always someone available to answer questions if needed," he says. "I

think the younger associates are comfortable seeking advice if they need it."

Spiros, who says he's never without a case pending against Thomas Mamer and Haughey, calls the caliber of the attorneys there phenomenal.

"Bill is truly practicing with a wonderful group of people," he says.

In an area as complex as medical malpractice, where cases routinely drag on for years, having a battle plan is crucial. Brinkmann's is simple and straightforward.

"It's important to do investigation as early as you can...because you can identify which cases are going to be tried and which cases are going to be settled," he explains. "Learn as much as you can about the client, about the issues, what evidence will come from medical records and so forth."

That approach has served him well over three decades of medical malpractice work. Brinkmann, who deals solely in defense work, has built "long, loyal" relationships

In his 34 years practicing in the Champaign area, Brinkmann has educated plenty of attorneys on how courtroom work is done.

"One thing I learned from Bill is that you might give up a first down, but don't give up a touchdown," Spiros says. "I've definitely learned from watching him."

### Changes to the Field

With over three decades of experience in medical malpractice, Brinkmann sees significant changes ahead for the field. The issue of statutory tort reform is before the Illinois Supreme Court right now, and similar reforms have been upheld in other states.

If the statutory reforms are upheld here, Brinkmann says, the law community will most likely see a big decrease in the number of medical malpractice filings.

"It's not going to make it go away, but it will limit the number of cases...particularly those where the potential for collecting damages is not high," he says.

A cause Brinkmann has taken on outside of his firm work is preserving the jury trial system, which he sees as slowly declining.

"Fewer cases are being resolved by trial...(which) has made it difficult for younger attorneys to become skilled at jury trials," he says.

Brinkmann is active in two groups, the International Association of Defense Counsel and the American College of Trial Lawyers, that have fought to keep the jury system alive through testimony to Congress and published articles on its importance. He credits both groups with keeping him involved in the law community both academically and socially.

"The camaraderie is terrific in both of them," he says. "You make friendships that last your whole life."

Brinkmann and his wife, Debbie, spend much of their free time visiting their three daughters, who are scattered across the country from Washington, D.C., to Denver. The couple squeezes in a round of golf whenever they can, says Brinkmann, a self-described "avid golfer."

But don't expect Brinkmann to start working on his swing full time for a while. Thomas, Mamer and Haughey, he says, has a grand tradition of veteran lawyers.

"One of the interesting things is we still have, actively practicing, two lawyers in their eighties and one lawyer in his seventies," he says.

Will that be Brinkmann in another decade or two? Quite possibly.

"I continue to enjoy my practice, and I think I will continue as long as I'm having a good time," he says. "I'm always trying to improve my skills and give clients the best service I can." ■