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Extending the Meaning of Family Business

Extending the Meaning OF FAMILY BUSINESS

Married Attorneys Build Extended Family in Real Estate, Trust and Estate Planning, and Business Practice

by Dan Baldwin

While dating at Chapman University Fowler School of Law, Ariana and Jason Burris discussed forming a practice together. That 2007 dream became a reality four years ago with the formation of Burris Law. Beyond that, the couple wanted to create a one-stop firm that treated clients and staff as members of an extended professional family dedicated to a way of doing business well-above the “turn and burn” mentality.

“We decided to practice together because we wanted to build the type of personal and professional life that we wanted for us, and that we wanted to share. We have the desire to write our own story, and not be a cog in the wheel of someone else’s story. We want to be able to work hard, have a supportive staff, and spend time growing as a family,” says Ariana Burris, Principal and head of the Trusts & Estates practice. Jason Burris, Principal, adds, “We had the opportunity to create the firm culture that we wanted to have from the ground up. You can try to affect the culture of a firm, but when your name is not on the building you can’t control it. We have a good-hearted culture at Burris Law that we share among ourselves, with our staff, and with our clients—I think that’s paramount.”

Ariana Burris served in the Orange County Public Defender’s Office and handled appeals in the federal judicial system prior to forming Burris Law. She now assists clients with estate planning; trust preparation, execution and funding; will preparation, documentation and execution; and prep and management of an array of simple-to-complex legal services

associated with trusts, estate planning, probate and wills. Before attending Chapman, she earned her Bachelor of Arts from Brigham Young University.

Jason Burris, Head of the Real Estate practice, has extensive experience in residential and commercial real estate settlements and transactions; business contracts and business litigation; LLC, partnership, corporate and individual entity formation and support; and a myriad of other related business legal issues with some of the most prominent real estate and business law firms in Orange County.

A self-described “deal junkie,” he says he goes into overdrive on cases to make certain he develops the right solution. “It’s different for every single client, but I push hard for clients to get into the mindset of resolution. Going to trial isn’t always the best solution for the client, but 99 percent of the time we can get the cases resolved and that should be our focus. I never want a client to throw good money after bad, just on principle. We want them to be able to move on to the things in their lives that really matter.”

Of Jason Burris, a satisfied client, Richard Slijk, wrote.

(Jason takes) A very methodical approach to his research and discovery work. And he actively listens, a very rare quality among attorneys. He was very easy to work with. These traits afford him the unique ability to convince opposing parties, as opposed to coerce, to get results.”

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COVER
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LAW FIRM
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Curiously to some perhaps, the couple that planned to be and are in business together, Ariana and Jason Burris do not work that closely in the office. They describe the experience as having two practices that co-exist under the same roof.

Ariana Burris jokes that, “As a married couple, if we worked together on all cases we probably wouldn’t be married anymore. Jason’s department is the real estate and corporate arm of the practice. My area is trust and estates. There is overlap, but by and large we operate independently of each other.”

But the system they developed and perfected works and works well, as attorney Meghan O’Brien Taylor wrote.

As a fellow attorney I take who I refer cases to very seriously. The quality of the attorney I refer a case to also reflects on me. I confidently refer cases to Ariana, knowing that the good work she does will make me look good in return! I recommend anyone with a estate planning needs contact her, you will get the one on one attention you deserve.

From a beginning as a couple working at the kitchen table, Burris Law has grown from just Ariana and Jason to also include two associate attorneys, an HR & Operations Manager, and two administrative staff. The firm serves clients throughout California.

Client Focused Family Operation

Both Principals always wanted to build a law firm that was different and strongly client-focused. Ariana Burris says, “We are literally a family operation. We try to be real people and be relatable to all our clients and help them find solutions to whatever ails them.”

For example, she frequently conducts business in the home or offices of her clients. She has often visited clients in their hospital room to conduct business, especially for estate planning needs. Recently she had a client who was in intensive care and desperately needed planning in place, particularly power of attorney and health care documents. She was able to help him establish his legal capacity to do so. In addition, she then made several visits to the hospital and care facilities to make sure that he was protected. The client later hired Burris Law to create a full estate plan for him and his family, which relieved a tremendous burden at a time when the family needed to focus on other personal and emotional challenges.

A client, Lauren DeLeonardis, recently wrote,

I found Burris Law after seeking help with a trust for an ailing relative. From the minute I met Ariana and Jason, I felt at peace putting the trust and estate in their hands. After my relative passed, Burris Law administered the estate in an efficient way, while being sensitive to my needs in this difficult time.”



Jason Burris says that the family approach sets them apart and gives the clients added value is derived partially from real-world experience. “There is a quality about the lawyers in this firm that is born out of the fact that we all came out of law school at the dark depth of the financial crisis. We have knowledge, experience and hustle beyond our years. It was sink or swim in that market and you had to have the strength go out there and find work, to claw and scratch your way to find and conduct business while other lawyers sat on the sidelines thinking ‘Oh, I’m not going to do *that* kind of work.’ That pays dividends to our clients on so many levels—billing, managing cases, treatment of clients, and so on. We really do understand the entrepreneurial mindset.”

The one-stop shop approach developed naturally. Many clients have a family, own property and run a business and



The team of Burris Law with their fearless leaders, Jason, and Ariana Burris.

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they often need additional legal or other professional services. Burris Law is a hub for clients for everything that comes up in their lives—financial, legal, or reputation issues. Ariana and Jason Burris tell clients to reach out if they need a referral, a connection, or a helping hand in the community. If they can't help directly, they have the professional contacts to find out exactly who can. "We have such a deep and broad network of other service professionals who are like-minded. We get them to the right person," Ariana Burris says.

The couple notes that while working for others was most often a positive experience and certainly a learning experience, they didn't have a lot of choice in their work load and travel schedule. They often felt like "marionettes" in the corporate culture. Ariana Burris says, "I just didn't have any ownership of my work, and I didn't see any opportunity to pursue things I

wanted to do in the law. For us the trigger for me was the birth of my daughter—it's not just me anymore. We realized that we could set ourselves up for success by having something that's ours that we can control and as a result we get to be involved with our daughter in meaningful ways as she grows up."

The professional family experience is felt by members of the staff in a mentor/mentee environment. In addition to working with their employees to improve their legal and administrative skills, the couple invests time and energy in helping them through the inevitable life stresses that arise. "We want to be a meaningful experience beyond the day-to-day work. We build strong relationships and those relationships continue even when an employee or client moves on. I even get referrals now from opposing parties and their counsels," Jason Burris says.

The couple works with their employees to help set a tone for

their lives—to instill responsibility and boundaries. “We want our staff to have a life, to spend time with their families and not have to be living and breathing Burris Law every second of the day. We need a break every day and we think our people do, too. We have worked for firms that sucked the life out of us. There’s a better way to do it and we’re finding that way. Coming to work shouldn’t be a bummer,” Ariana Burris says.

Out of the Office and Into the Community

The Burris family lives in North Tustin and has lived there for nine years. They have one daughter, Cameron (age two) and a rescue dog named Wheaties, who is



There is more to life than just work, a culture of work-life balance is the key to success.

a frequent unofficial member of the firm’s client-greeting staff.

They are active in supporting the legal and the civic community. Each year the firm anonymously provides help for a family in need. They work closely with Mercy House, an organization providing housing and other services for people coming out of homelessness.

As Chapman graduates, they are involved as volunteers, donors, and mentors to the university, faculty and staff, and the students. “We wear a lot of hats with Chapman,” Ariana Burris says.

She is an active member with Wealth Counsel, an association and think tank comprised of estate planning, trust and probate attorneys, financial planners and other professionals.

Jason Burris is active with his Chapman University undergraduate and law school Alumni Associations. He serves as the Chairman of the Fowler School of Law Alumni Board; serves as a hands-on volunteer Elder with his church; and is also a prolific legal and business writer, successfully publishing articles throughout his academic and professional life.

Ariana Burris remains active with the Chapman University Alumni Association (serving as Board member and Vice President for the past four years). Her stress-relief regimen includes running marathons, half-marathons and other long distances.

Burris Law is also proving an ability to go the distance in client service. As Jason Burris says, “This might sound like a cliché, but for me it’s a thrill when you reach that moment where you look back and you see all the work you’ve put in and you say, ‘You know this person came to me months or years ago and they picked me, they paid me, they followed my advice, I created the solution and the result. And here is where we’ve arrived.’ It’s a beautiful thing. It’s like composing a symphony.” ■

Contact

Burris Law
200 North Tustin Avenue
Suite 110
Santa Ana, CA 92705
714-941-8122
www.burris-law.net