In Good Health: Partners find their niche in legal field

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Figure that any attempt at health care reform will be good for business at The Health Law Partners, a Southfield-based firm where a pair of founding partners share more than a legal vision.

At first glance, Abby Pendleton and Adrienne Dresevic, both magna cum laude graduates of Wayne State University Law School, are legal look-alikes, striking blonde-haired attorneys with a kindred spirit and passion for the field of health care law.

But there is more to their story, much more to their growing reputation for helping clients navigate the dizzying world of regulatory compliance issues, health care billing

and reimbursement matters, Medicare and Medicaid appeals, and physician licensing and privileging issues.

Pendleton and Dresevic are twins. Identical, in fact.

That the twin sisters are partners – co-founders of a law firm with 18 attorneys and offices in Southfield, New York, and now Atlanta – wasn't necessarily pre-destined, although their academic paths were noticeably similar.

Both graduated from Northville High School, earning bachelor degrees with honors from Central Michigan University in 1993. Pendleton was a finance major, while Dresevic studied accounting, planning at one point to pursue a career as a CPA.

As a precursor to their legal work, each excelled in a different "court" setting, as standout high school tennis players, achieving conference, regional and state recognition in singles competition.

"Not to brag, but we were both pretty good," says Pendleton, declining to say who held the upper hand on the tennis courts.

Following college, Pendleton enrolled at Wayne Law, finishing second in her 1996 graduating class. Dresevic took a different route to law school, working first as an auditor for National Bank of Detroit and beginning to raise a family with her husband, a native of Montenegro in the former Yugoslavian state.

"My two daughters were two and three when I enrolled in law school," says Dresevic. "It was a challenge to juggle school with raising two young girls, but my family was incredibly supportive and we made it happen."

Like her sister, Dresevic was a standout student at Wayne Law, also finishing second in her graduating class of 2002. She served as a law clerk for Wachler & Associates during her final two years of law school, a role that Pendleton filled as well six years earlier. Each eventually became a partner with the firm before branching out on their own in 2009 to

form The Health Law Partners (HLP).

"There were five of us who came together to form the original group for the firm," Dresevic says, noting the founding roles of her partners Jessica Gustafson, Robert Iwrey, and Carey Kalmowitz. "We have been committed to a pattern of measured growth, opening offices where there are opportunities for a boutique firm to make a difference for our clients."

The opening of the firm's Atlanta office two years ago is a prime example, according to Pendleton, who is the president of HLP. Attorney Daniel Brown serves as the Atlanta office's managing shareholder and is "considered one of the country's foremost experts regarding legal issues impacting sleep medicine." Says Pendleton, "Dan literally wrote the book on health compliance for sleeplabs."

The firm's upward trajectory can be traced, in part, to a "strategic decision" to focus on complex health care matters, according to Dresevic and Pendleton. Health care, after all, accounts for one-sixth of our nation's spending, double the share of 30 years ago.

"Health care law is a field that is becoming more complex all the time as government involvement increases," Dresevic says. "We have identified specific areas where we offer expertise

and those areas are expected to grow, even in a down economy."

The sisters have both written extensively on health care regulatory subjects for State Bar and American Bar Association publications, and take pride in the number of speaking engagements they are invited to each year.

"We enjoy the opportunity to share our knowledge of new developments in the health care field, and all the writing and speaking that we do keeps us engaged with state and national experts," Pendleton says. "It is a field that is constantly changing, and continuing education is an absolute must."

As twins, Pendleton and Dresevic are the daughters of Doris and John Edwards, two of the couple's four children. Their father, an alumnus of Rochester Institute of Technology, recently retired from Ford Motor Co. after spending 40 years as a mechanical engineer and management executive with the giant automaker. Their mother, valedictorian of her high school class, fills much of her time with volunteer work, aiding such charitable causes as meals on wheels and soup kitchens for the area's needy.

While Pendleton and Dresevic are figuratively joined at the hip in legal circles, they each are the mothers of two daughters. Dresevic has a 17- and a 15-year-old, Olivia and Sofia, a high school senior and sophomore, respectively. Pendleton is the mom of Brooke, 8, and Sammy, 9, a third- and a fourth-grader.

The family ties to the firm are not limited to the sisters. Pendleton's husband, Phil, a former financial manager for a health care system, joined the law firm last year as its chief operating officer. Her sister's husband, Deada, who owns a residential and

commercial construction business, handled the build-outs for the law firm's office off Northwestern Highway.

Yet, it is the sisters, both marathon runners, who help make the law firm hum, parlaying their complementary strengths like they have since childhood.

"It is wonderful to work with my sister, to enjoy the opportunity to help build a legal practice together with our other partners and associates," Dresevic says. "We obviously have a connection that extends far beyond work and that makes the joy of it even more special for both of us."

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