

FRIDAY, JUNE 13, 2014

Oakland civil rights firm forged in Detroit

By Hamed Aleaziz / Daily Journal Staff Writer

OAKLAND — Husband and wife Michael Haddad and Julia Sherwin, co-heads of Oakland civil rights firm Haddad & Sherwin, draw strength from their hometown of Detroit.

“Our firm was made in Detroit. We never quit,” reads the four-attorney firm’s website.

In an interview, Haddad said, “A lot of people from Detroit never give up. I feel like that was instilled in us.”

“We know what it’s like to be from a place that’s always down and to fight anyway.”

The firm has scored major legal victories — including million-dollar awards and department reforms — in civil rights cases against law enforcement.

Sherwin and Haddad got their start at one of the nation’s first racially integrated firms, Goodman, Eden, Millender & Bedrosian, in Detroit. Co-founded by George W. Crockett Jr., who later was elected to Congress, the firm handled civil rights lawsuits aimed at law enforcement, as well as personal injury and medical malpractice cases.

The two describe the atmosphere at the firm for new attorneys as a “boot camp.” In their first year, Sherwin handled 44 cases and Haddad saw more than 50. Despite the workload, both attorneys cite mentoring from older lawyers at the firm as key to their success.

“It’s a very briefing-intensive practice. They did the briefing at a very high level,” Sherwin said. “I think the crazy initiation by fire we had was good training for how to do this work efficiently.”

After the firm dissolved, the two young attorneys headed west in 1998 to California, where they had already taken the bar exam. Haddad and Sherwin had regularly visited the state for vacations. “We loved California,” Haddad said.

They decided to start their own firm. For the first five years they maintained offices in their home. In the beginning, Haddad and Sherwin followed the model of their former firm, taking civil rights lawsuits against law enforcement with additional casework on personal injury, employment and medical malpractice cases. These days, the firm focuses primarily on wrongful death and serious injury cases involving law enforcement.

One of their first major victories came in 2001, when the firm represented a mentally ill man fatally shot by police officers in Vacaville. In 1997, Doron Lifton, a 33-year-old man with schizophrenia, crashed his car into two other vehicles.



Hamed Aleaziz / Daily Journal

Michael Haddad, left, and Julia Sherwin are husband and wife and co-heads of an Oakland-based civil rights law firm.

When a police officer arrived at the scene, Lifton waved a metal pipe. The officer called in an 1199 warning, which means an officer’s life is in danger. That, said Haddad, provoked “a very extreme response from the Vacaville police officers ... They came driving up screeching tires and lights. By then this man was in a field and he hadn’t done anything.”

Another officer unsuccessfully attempted to use a Taser on Lifton. Witnesses were split on what they saw happen next, Haddad said. Some witnesses said they saw Lifton charge toward the officers with the pipe while others said he stood there and shrugged. One officer said Lifton struck him with the pipe. The police proceeded to fire 14 rounds and Lifton was hit eight times. He was pronounced dead at the scene.

The attorneys were able to convince a federal jury that the police acted negligently. They received an approximately \$850,000 verdict for Lifton’s mother that the 9th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals affirmed.

The trial win, Haddad said, was a key moment in the firm’s history.

“It was really critical to have gone to trial and proven that we could win a difficult police shooting case,” Haddad said. “We’ve probably resolved eight or nine more wrongful death cases involving police since then, not just because of that but everything builds on the last [case].”

Since 2001, the firm has garnered dozens of

verdicts and settlements, including wins of \$5.85 million and \$3.5 million in police misconduct cases, across the Bay Area.

One of the firm’s major challenges, Sherwin said, is going against the government’s “unlimited resources.”

“We don’t have the same advantages, so it requires us to be smarter, more lean and work harder,” Sherwin said.

The firm makes it a point to choose its cases carefully.

“We screen probably a few hundred cases before we take a case. Because we don’t get paid unless we win and we pay all the litigation costs, we have to be very, very selective,” she said.

It also helps that the two know each other so well.

“We have this intuition about what one of us is thinking or might need, which comes in handy during a trial,” Haddad said. “When one of us is at the lectern examining a witness, the other one is getting the document ready for the next question before it’s asked,” he said.

Now, 16 years after the two attorneys made the more than 2,000-mile journey westward, they reflect fondly on their decision.

“Oakland is our home now. I don’t think either us will regret moving to California,” said Haddad.

“This,” he said, “was where we were born to be, even with our great love for Detroit, Michigan.”