

# Gina Barry

## Estate Planning Specialist Blends Law with a Passion for Animals

By GEORGE O'BRIEN

**G**ina Barry says she's always had compassion for the underdog ... and for the dog, as well.

And the cat, the bird, the fish in her 75-gallon aquarium, and for all horses everywhere.

The estate planning specialist and associate at the Springfield firm Bacon & Wilson told *BusinessWest* that she has a deep love of animals and always wanted to somehow make this passion part of her law practice.

She has, through the cultivation of a rather unique niche — estate planning for animals. As she explained, this is obviously a new, emerging specialty focused on helping animal enthusiasts — from the woman with two cats to the professional llama breeder — put in place provisions to ensure that their animals are properly cared for should anything happen to their owners.

"It's actually estate planning for people with pets — that's a better way to phrase it," said Barry, adding that she has been asked to speak on the subject before a number of groups and has seen her client list in this realm grow, with great promise for the future. "The statistics on people and animals are incredible; people are really intrigued by this."

Estate planning for animals is a very small part of the practice that Barry, named an 'Up and Coming Lawyer' by *Mass. Lawyers Weekly* in 2004, has built since she joined Bacon & Wilson in 2001. As she talked about her early years with the firm, she reached for a calculator, punched in a few numbers, and confirmed her estimate that she has increased her first-year billings by a factor of a 30.

She's done it through hard



### The Gina Barry File:

**Education:** Western New England College, J.D., 1999; Westfield State College, B.A., 1996

**Current Position:** Associate with the Springfield firm Bacon & Wilson

**Areas of Practice:** Estate Planning and Elder Law; Real Estate and Zoning

**Professional and Community Activities:** Hampden County Bar Assoc., Greater Springfield Business & Professional Women's Club, Western Mass. Elder Care Professionals; Holyoke North Business Network International; Women's Partnership; Women's Business Owners Alliance of the Pioneer Valley

work, organization (with the help of a coach), and a dedication to serving the client — which brings her back to her reference to the underdog.

"I didn't want to push paper — I wanted to help clients," she said of her work within the legal community. "When it came to practice areas, I wanted to get into something where I thought I was making a difference in people's daily lives.

"There are any number of

clients who will come to me with an issue; often, their spouse is in a nursing home and they're not sure how they're going to pay for it," she continued. "You can tell that they're extremely stressed and worried. By the end of the meeting, they're breathing more freely and they're more relaxed, because they have information."

### Dogged Determination

Barry told *BusinessWest* that estate planning and elder law are

growing specialties — due to a variety of factors but especially the graying of America and longer life expectancy — and an area of the law for which people should seek out a specialist, not a generalist, and especially not their neighbor.

"They're a real problem; neighbors are the worst source of legal advice ever," she said. "Whenever anyone tells me that their neighbor told them something, I always ask, 'and where did your neighbor go to law school?'"

And even if that neighbor did study law, he or she might not be able to offer sound advice in the areas of estate planning and elder law, she said, noting that the specialty is becoming increasingly complex. "Medicaid, especially, is very specialized," she explained. "You wouldn't want to go to just anybody to get Medicaid-planning advice; it's like the medical field — if you have cancer, you go to an oncologist."

And this is a specialty that gives Barry what she wanted from a legal career — "a little bit of everything."

"In order to be properly engaged, I need something that is challenging but also social," she explained. "This area of law allows me to have a lot of client contact, it allows me to be in court on a fairly regular basis, and it provides more challenges than most people would want; there's a nice mix between the social and the paperwork."

Work in estate planning, or any aspect of law, was not exactly a lifelong ambition for Barry. In fact, on her application to Western England College School of Law, she wrote just that.

While attending WNEC, Barry worked as a clerk at Bacon

& Wilson, where she was exposed to the corporate character — an open-door philosophy, as she described it — that later attracted her. She took a one-year contract as a judicial clerk for the Mass. Superior Court, and then joined Bacon & Wilson as an associate after researching firms.

“I wanted to make certain that I went to a firm that felt more like family than competition,” she said, adding that many lawyers at the firm have helped her develop her practice over the years. “If I have an issue, I can go to any lawyer in the firm.”

Still, like most young lawyers, Barry struggled with several aspects of her work early on. She told *BusinessWest* that many of the growing pains, from a professional development standpoint, stemmed in some ways from wanting to move faster than her talents would allow.

“When you come out of law school you have a great education in mastering legal analysis, but you are very rarely given any skills in business administration,” said Barry, who described the first few years of most lawyers’ careers as the ‘realm of the unknown.’ “The practice of law is very different from the *business* of law, and that’s what needs to be

learned out in the field.

“When I first started practicing, I was overwhelmed; I wanted to know as much as partners did right away,” she continued. “There’s a learning curve that you just don’t want to cope with, and I got very stressed out.”

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So she hired a business coach, who helped bring a sense of order, and organization, to her career.

“Coaches help you to develop solutions to the problems you’re having without giving you the solution,” she explained, adding that, in her case, work centered on developing systems and work patterns that would help her become more efficient.

Born in Holyoke and still living in the same house she grew up in, Barry is quite active within the community, which suits her personality and fits in nicely with Bacon & Wilson’s desires to have

its lawyers be involved in the region.

Barry is active with several peer groups, including the National Academy of Elder Law Attorneys, the Estate Planning Council of Hampden County, the Hampden County Bar Assoc.,

and others, and is also involved with many professional women’s organizations.

Indeed, she was recently honored as Woman of the Year by the Women Business Owners Alliance of the Pioneer Valley, and is currently first vice president of the Greater Springfield Business & Professional Women’s Club. She is also active with the Women’s Partnership, and is currently a board member.

Community involvement stretches to several organizations in the region — she has participated in several Muscular

Distrophy Assoc. marathons — and also well outside it: she sponsors a 10-year-old girl in Uganda for the Child Reach program.

Looking forward, Barry said she has several personal and professional goals. Making partner at Bacon & Wilson is at the top of the latter list, while attaining a judgeship is for further down the road.

Meanwhile, she wants to create a unique equine rescue mission.

As she explained, the facility would be a working farm staffed by women recovering from abusive situations in their lives. “They would be rebuilding horses as they were rebuilding their lives,” said Barry, adding that she hopes to realize that vision in a few years.

### **Paws for Effect**

Creating the rescue mission would enable Barry to blend a number of passions, especially community involvement and animals.

She would also be working on behalf of the underdog, something she has done throughout her professional life. ♦

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