



John Houghtaling 33, purchased the practice of attorney Wendell Gauthier, who died of cancer in 2001. Houghtaling will be the new managing partner.

Famed N.O. practice ruled by new lawyer

By Richard A. Webster
Staff Writer

JOHN HOUGHTALING was about to enter law school at Loyola University New Orleans when his mother suggested he send in a resume to Wendell Gauthier's firm.

Houghtaling knew of the famed New Orleans attorney who brought five of the big tobacco companies to their collective knees by winning a \$206 billion settlement. The National Law Journal consistently named Gauthier one of the 10 best trial lawyers in the country and one of the 100 most powerful attorneys in the country.

Houghtaling also knew Gauthier had not hired anyone out of law school in more than 10 years. He told his mother she was crazy and began applying to other law firms in the city.

One day, Houghtaling saw an ad in the classifieds. Gauthier was looking for someone to move boxes in his file room. The pay was \$8 an hour.

"I stopped all interviews with the downtown firms and showed up to Wendell's office in a suit and tie and with my laptop," Houghtaling said. "I just wanted to get my foot in their door."

The gamble paid off. Last week, the family of the late Gauthier who died of cancer in 2001, announced the 33-year old Houghtaling had bought the firm and will be the new managing partner. No purchase price was disclosed.

The firm, formerly known as Gauthier Downing, LaBarre, Dean and Sulzer, will be renamed Gauthier Houghtaling, Williams and Sulzer.

"It's been a wild ride," Houghtaling said. "Seven years later, from the file room and now sitting behind Wendell's desk."

Other lawyers had been with the firm far longer but Houghtaling was chosen after he proved his mettle to Gauthier's family. In the past two years alone, he brought in more than \$35 million in settlements.

Wendell Gauthier's daughter, Celeste Gauthier, said the decision to hand the firm over to Houghtaling was an easy one to make.

"My dad was always very impressed by John. They shared a lot of things in common and John is in the best position to do it. I think dad is smiling at us right now," she said.

Houghtaling said three of his many cases stick out.

The first involved Eddie Benoit, a Jefferson Parish Sheriff's deputy severely injured in an explosion six years ago. The blast killed his brother and best friend and threw Benoit into a coma for six months.

He awoke with no hands, dimmed eyesight, muffled hearing and he was barely able to speak. The explosion burned the features from Benoit's face.

Houghtaling won Benoit a \$7 million settlement from a foreign product manufacturer, whose name is sealed by a

confidentiality agreement. It is one of the largest personal injury settlements in Louisiana history.

David Courcelle of Courcelle and Burkhalter LLC in Metairie, who referred the Benoit case to Houghtaling, was not surprised Houghtaling was chosen to head the Gauthier firm.

"My office is just around the corner from his and I see his car there as late as 11 at night and as early as 6:30 in the morning," Courcelle said. "He has a great desire to get the best outcome for his clients and has brought in a ton of money to the firm."

The second case involved a truck that veered in front of a car carrying five welders home to their families. All five men were killed leaving nine children fatherless. Houghtaling won a \$5.25 million settlement for two of the families from Kansas City Railroad.

The last case was particularly tragic, Houghtaling said. Two years ago a drunk driver killed the Deshotel family, a mother, father and two young boys. Just 10 months ago, Houghtaling won a \$4.7 million settlement for the biological mother deprived of her boys.

"We only take the real catastrophic tragedies, the cases we believe in, and we generally don't lose," he said. "It goes back to Wendell who found ways to level the playing field between the average citizen and these huge corporations with hundreds of lawyers and millions of dollars at their disposal. It's a real David-and-Goliath story."

Houghtaling describes Gauthier as a larger-than-life figure with a down-home sensibility.

"Wendell was a Cajun, real country with a thick accent," he said. "You'd have these big tobacco lawyers flying in on their \$45 million Gulfstreams and here was Wendell, famous for mispronouncing words, using big words in inappropriate ways and even making up words. You could never tell if he did it on purpose to be disarming or if that was just Wendell."

When Wendell became ill, employees at the firm grew scared, Houghtaling said. Many important cases were in various stages of litigation.

No one knew what was going to happen so Houghtaling said he simply put his nose to the grindstone and pushed as hard as he could.

"I was generating business and turning over cases," Houghtaling said. "The family took notice and approached me. We started talking about me taking over the firm. It was very strange. I wasn't sure how all of these lawyers who had been with the firm for so long would react. Ed Downing (a partner in the firm) came in and shook my hand. He congratulated me and said he couldn't blame them."

Downing, who was with the firm for more than 20 years, said there are no hard feelings among employees.

"We're at different points in our careers," said Downing. "I want to spend a little less time practicing law. I have a house in Florida where I want to spend more time getting a suntan on the beach. Everyone wishes him the best of luck."

Downing will remain loosely affiliated with the firm. The status of two former partners, Scott LaBarre and Bruce Dean, is undecided.

The firm now has 10 attorneys and a total of 28 employees.

Last week Houghtaling finally got around to moving his belongings into Gauthier's office.

"Wendell's dry cleaning was still on a hook," he said. "When I opened the desk drawer I found a monkey mask with other practical joke things. Though the press painted him as this big scary trial lawyer who would do anything to win he was a real practical joker and a down-to-earth guy. I tell you it's been strange these past few days. It was only eight years ago when I told my mom she was crazy for suggesting I try to work for Wendell Gauthier."