



From left: Partner James Williams, legal assistant Becky Allen and partner John Houghtaling of Gauthier, Houghtaling & Williams hold a mock trial at the firm's office.

Gauthier, Houghtaling & Williams

In March 2005, the law firm established by the late Wendell Gauthier found itself under the new ownership of its most junior partner, John Houghtaling.

This transition occurred after Gauthier's death, and Houghtaling said the firm was in flux.

"It was a scary time," Houghtaling said. "We had several people who had been with us for more than 20 years, and we were all worried what would happen."

Luckily, the firm was able to keep every employee who wanted to stay. The firm threw a big party celebrating the new administration, closing the street and serving everyone lobster.

But when Hurricane Katrina hit New Orleans, the firm would learn the party may have started too soon.

"We had 30 to 35 employees at that time, and I was 100 percent responsible for the payroll," Houghtaling said. "That could have bankrupt me."

Houghtaling said he and his partner, James Williams, had to make a strong decision. The two decided that no matter what, even if they had to mortgage their houses, they would push forward.

"We didn't stop one paycheck. We didn't stop one benefit," Houghtaling said. "James and I dug deep into our pockets and put everything we had."

Those benefits include fully paid health insurance, long-term disability and life insurance. Employees are also recognized with a performance-based recognition program.

Chief Financial Officer Chuck Jouandot said the No. 1 thing is the way you deal with people all the time, not just during crises.

"We didn't have to have a big meeting," Jouandot said of the time after Katrina. "Our employees trusted us, and we trusted them."

Melissa Pierce, Houghtaling's administrative assistant, said she remembers the first call from Jouandot after the hurricane hit.

"He was trying to gather everyone's bank account numbers so the firm could deposit our paychecks into our accounts," Pierce said. "Those deposits continued until the office was back open, no questions asked."

Pierce also remembers the first post-storm conver-

Employees: 34

Average starting salary: \$75,000 for attorneys, \$37,000 for staff

Median salary: \$200,000 for attorneys, \$42,000 for staff

Average time employees stay with company: 15 years

Benefits: health care with 100 percent coverage, 401(k) with 3 percent match, prescriptions, employee recognition program

Wait time for benefits: one year

Paid time off: 14 paid days off, 18 sick days

Web site: www.ghwlaw.net

sation she had with Houghtaling.

"He was already trying to plan how to keep the firm together and avoiding by all means laying anyone off," Pierce said. "The possibility of letting anyone go was never an option for him."

Three years later, the loyalty has lasted. As a result, the firm has opened another office in Houston.

"Reputation is what's important," Houghtaling said. "All of our employees are loyal to the firm, and we're very loyal to them."•

— Amanda Thomas