



Wiggin and Dana partner Mark Heaphy says he enjoys bringing his guide dog, Simon, to the office. 'He just sleeps in the corner all day,' Heaphy said.

Mia Malafrontie

CHASING THE SHADOWS

Blind lawyer uses technology to deal with 'nuisance'

By CHRISTIAN NOLAN

At the age of 12, Mark W. Heaphy lost his eyesight as the result of a lengthy battle with Stevens-Johnson Syndrome, a potentially fatal skin disease that attacks mucous membranes.

He endured multiple surgeries to his eyes and esophagus. Two years of his childhood

in Virginia were spent in hospitals.

But Heaphy did not let a sudden life-altering disability keep him down. In fact, he's continued to go about his life as he hoped, describing his vision impairment as simply "a nuisance."

"All kids have different kinds of challenges to overcome. Kids are resilient," Heaphy told the *Law Tribune* in an interview. "You have to deal with that sort of

thing. Things have turned out OK."

That is an understatement. Heaphy, now 38, just made partner at Wiggin and Dana in New Haven and chairs their information technology and sourcing group. The position requires extensive travel, as Heaphy has routinely handled negotiations involving millions of dollars in such places as Chicago, Atlanta, London, China and India.

By his side, whether at his office or at a meeting in California, is his guide dog Simon, a black lab, golden retriever mix that he's had since 2002. "I get to bring my dog to work, so that's a plus. He just sleeps in the corner over there all day," Heaphy said.

If you think being unable to see pages and pages of legal documents poses a problem for Heaphy, think again. "Most things are electronic now," he said.

Heaphy has a speech synthesizer program on his computer that reads the documents to him. He also has a hand-held device, similar to a Blackberry, that reads to him e-mails and text messages. He knows brail but it is not needed in the course of his practice.

"I would expect unless a client was having a face-to-face meeting (with Heaphy) they'd be oblivious to the fact he's blind," said Mary R. Norris, chair of the business practice department at Wiggin and Dana. Norris has been one of Heaphy's supervisors since he started with the firm as a summer associate in 1995.

"He works seamlessly with the technology he has," continued Norris. "His disability has never come into play...He really is outstanding. I'd say that if he had no disability, but because he does makes it that much more amazing."

Overcoming The Battle

Heaphy's father was in the Air Force, so he was forced to move around during his childhood. He's lived throughout the country, from Alaska to Texas to

Delaware. He spent the majority of his youth in Virginia, from the time he was ill through high school, leading a fairly normal life of swimming and playing in the high school band.

But his battle with Stevens-Johnson Syndrome could have been more tragic. The disease is caused by a severe adverse reaction to medication; such reactions account for approximately 150,000 deaths a year in the U.S., according to the Stevens-Johnson Syndrome Foundation, making them the fourth-leading cause of death in this country.

Heaphy's lost eyesight is a daily reminder of his perseverance.

He then launched toward his professional career, attending The College of William & Mary in Williamsburg, Va., and graduating in 1990 before earning a masters degree in international relations in 1993 from Yale.

While in New Haven, he met his wife, Jill.

He next went to law school at the University of Virginia, graduating in 1996. His third-year of law school was spent at Yale, however, so he could be closer to Jill. The

couple now lives in North Haven and has three children, ages 8, 6, and 4.

Now when he's not assisting a client in licensing its software, as he did recently with General Electric's global banking software, he teaches a course each fall at Quinnipiac on Internet Law, which he's done the past eight years.

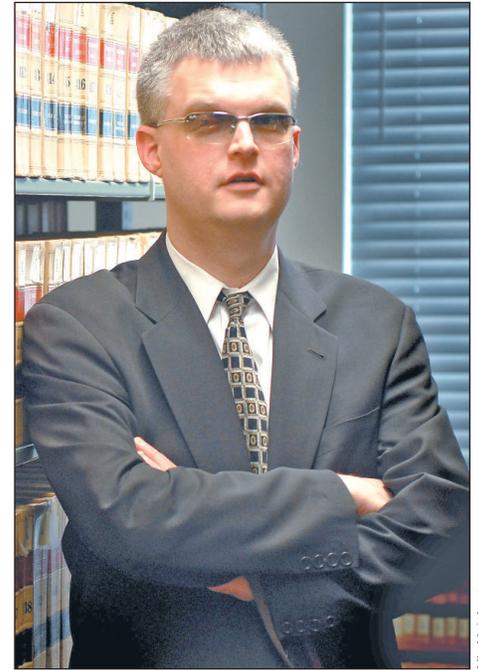
He said he "tried it and liked it" and described teaching as "fun."

Heaphy also regularly lectures on legal topics related to outsourcing, licensing and privacy issues.

"He has boundless energy to accomplish all this," said Norris. "And he's a good teacher from what I've heard. He has an amazing memory. One I wish I had," Norris added.

Meanwhile, Heaphy said he just wants "to continue on the path" he's currently on as he clearly seemed more comfortable talking about his IT legal team at Wiggin and Dana than his disability. "It's not that major of an issue," he said, modestly.

"The firm's very supportive of this practice area and we have a good core group to build around," he said. ■



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Advances in technology have made it easier for Mark Heaphy to practice law. Speech synthesizer programs read to him documents, e-mails and text messages.