

# Friday Feature

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## All-encompassing

*Attorney proves to be a man of many talents*

By TOM KIRVAN  
Legal News

The adage that a “Jack of all trades is a master of none” will never be used to describe Northville attorney John P. Kelly, the multi-talented senior partner of Kelly & Kelly, P.C.

In fact, if Kelly hadn’t decided to cast his lot with the law, he was well positioned to enjoy career success as a CPA with one of the Big Eight accounting firms that dominated the profession in the 1980s and ‘90s.

Or there was the possibility of becoming a builder of custom homes, luxury models that dot the landscape in the vibrant community of Northville, where he recently built a new house within walking distance to his law firm’s office.

Kelly, a 1979 graduate of Michigan State University who earned his law degree from University of Detroit Mercy in 1985, also would have – and has – made a name for himself as a community leader and activist, nearly doubling the size of the local Rotary Club when he served as president and helping various other nonprofit organizations with his energy and smarts.

Such beneficiaries include Tipping Point Theatre, a professional nonprofit theater located in downtown Northville, for which Kelly is a member of the board of directors and the Friends of the Rouge organization, a nonprofit “dedicated to promoting restoration and stewardship of the Rouge River,” which has four major branches spanning 126 river miles in the counties of Oakland, Wayne, and Washtenaw.

Kelly was elected to the Friends of the Rouge board of directors two years ago after being encouraged to run for an opening by Marie McCormick, executive director of the organization.

“A couple years ago, John and his wife Michele volunteered to be site coordinators for a Rouge Rescue site in Northville,” said McCormick. “John organized a very successful litter cleanup, invasive species removal, woody debris management, and kayak launch installation in the Northville West Recreation Area in Hines Park.

“After that first cleanup, I approached John about becoming a board member,” McCormick related. “After a few conversations, he agreed to run for a spot – and in 2017 won a seat for the 2018 board. John played a major role in reviewing and negotiating terms for our lease agreement with the Plymouth Arts and Recreation Complex (PARC) in Plymouth. He advised myself and the board on the whole process.”

In short, said McCormick, “We are very fortunate to have a practicing lawyer on our board, who also happens to love the Rouge and his community.”

His love for the Rouge may have been spawned at one of its low moments some 50 years ago. In the summer of 1969, shortly after the infamous Cuyahoga River fire in Cleveland, the “oil-matted Rouge” caught fire, shooting flames 50 feet in the air and sending smoke billowing near the I-75 bridge in southwest Detroit.

“It’s an anniversary worth celebrating only because of how the Rouge has changed since that time,” said Kelly. “Since then, communities have rallied around it, to help keep it clean and flowing freely for public enjoyment. I’m proud to be a part of that effort.”

Kelly’s “can-do” attitude was par-

ticularly evident when he served as president of the Northville Rotary Club several years ago.

“I’m not much of a meeting guy, so I wanted to change Rotary from a ‘meeting club’ to more of a ‘service club,’” Kelly said.

So, instead of the traditional weekly “meeting” of the club, Kelly instituted a different format over the course of each month.

“We took out two of the regular meetings each month and exchanged them for a service project and a fellowship program,” Kelly said. “I took every member aside to sell them on the idea before going ahead with it, but it proved to be a success, boosting our membership from 28 members to 45 members.”

Several of the projects have included building a community garden for Yorkshire Woods, an increasingly vibrant community on Detroit’s east side, and cleanup work in downtown Detroit with Life Remodeled, at Maybury State Park, and the Rouge River Watershed, according to Kelly.

“I’ve always embraced the outdoors, so any project where I can enhance its beauty is of interest to me,” Kelly said. “I love to ski, bike, golf, scuba dive, and fly fish, all sports that I’ve enjoyed throughout my life.”

Those leisure time pursuits have helped cement the bond of his family,

juris doctor degree cum laude from Detroit Mercy Law, where she was involved in national moot court competitions.

“Ryan and I are a wickedly good team often working together on cases, especially complicated matters,” Michele Kelly said in the 2015 feature story. “I’m very proud of her – she is not only an attorney, she chose to pursue a challenging area of law, high conflict divorces.”

For daughter Ryan, mother Michele is held in especially high regard.

“My mother has never been just a lawyer, she also is a wife, a mother, a business owner, serves on the board of directors both in and out of the legal field, and finds time for her many other interests,” Ryan said. “Working to achieve a balance in my own life is something I want to model after my mom and her career.”

Son Michael, now in his sixth year with Kelly & Kelly, specializes in criminal defense work. A 2008 Michigan State grad, Michael earned his law degree three years later. He already has been recognized by the National Academy of Criminal Defense Attorneys as one of the “Top 10 Under 40 for Criminal Defense in Michigan.” His pledge to his clients is straightforward:

“I make a personal commitment to each and every one of my clients that I hold with the highest regard,” he said. “Golden rules: Do your part, I’ll do mine. Stay the course, let me navigate the obstacles.”

Such an approach resonates well with his father, whose legal expertise is in civil and probate matters. His legal triumphs have included successfully contesting a will against a caregiver “who coerced the decedent to give him all her money” and “removal of a trustee who invaded trust assets for her drug addicted daughter.”

“I’ve been involved in a number of what could termed ‘crazy cases,’ including a murder-suicide where a man stabbed his wife and then lit himself on fire,” Kelly related. “It took three to four years for that case to make its way through the courts and for us to win the wrongful death claim against the estate.”

Kelly, a Birmingham Seaholm grad, began his legal career with Plunkett Cooney, spending four years with the firm before moving to California where Michele grew up and attended college at California Lutheran University. Upon the couple’s return to Michigan, Kelly lived out a longtime desire to “own my own business and be my own boss,” a dream that he now shares with his law partner/wife.

The couple, who will mark their 37th anniversary this year and have

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which is well represented in the boutique firm headed by Kelly and his wife, Michele. The six-lawyer firm also includes their daughter Ryan and son Michael, along with Erin Flynn and Joseph Gonzalez.

“We focus our practices on estate planning, probate law, real estate, criminal defense, and family law,” Kelly said.

Like their parents, Ryan and Michael earned their law degrees from University of Detroit Mercy. Ryan got an early start at the firm, working as a teen answering the phone and helping with the billing.

“When I was a teen-ager, I used to answer the phones when the secretary went to lunch,” Ryan said during a 2015 Mother’s Day feature appearing in The Legal News. “One day someone remarked how young I sounded – I told them that I should sound young, I am only 13!”

An MSU alumna, Ryan joined the family firm in 2008 after earning her



Family is at the heart of Kelly & Kelly, P.C., a Northville law firm that includes (l-r) Michael, Michele, John, and Ryan Kelly. Both Michele and John relish community involvement and encourage their children to give back to the community that has been so generous to them.

eight grandchildren, met during orientation at Detroit Mercy Law and were married following their first year of law school.

“Michele is an amazing woman, a terrific attorney, and I am truly blessed to be married to her,” Kelly said. “We are fortunate that we share of love for each other and a love for the law.”

He acknowledged that running a family business can present its “own set of challenges,” but “we are fortunate that everyone buries those for the good of the firm.”

The Kellys also have two other children, Jack, who owns Imagine Landscape and Design, and Megan, a real estate agent in the Northville area.

One of eight children, Kelly grew up in the “shadows of St. Regis,” the son of a dentist.

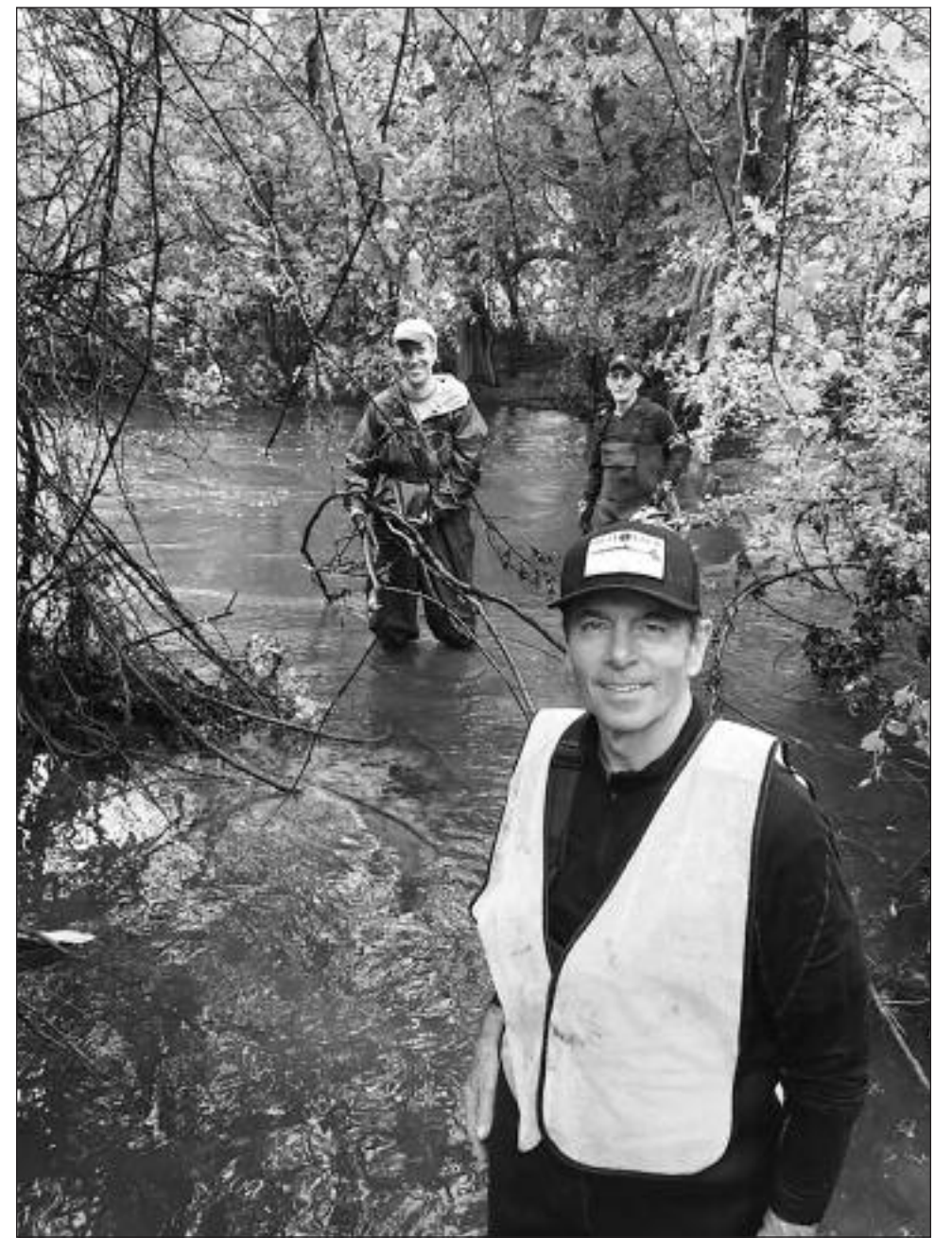
“My dad (Gerald) is now 92 and has been retired for 30 years,” Kelly said. “My mom (Georgia) now is a resident of a nursing home. They have been wonderful parents and gave us the traditional Irish-Catholic upbringing, stressing the value of hard work and the importance of family.”

Aside from a successful law practice, Kelly also has displayed his work ethic as a licensed builder for the past 12 years, building and renovating homes in the area.

“I learned those skills during law school and have always had a love for working with my hands,” Kelly said. “It’s a big part of my life and has been a great outlet for me.”

In fact, Kelly recently built his own house and is currently helping his son Michael renovate his dwelling.

“I get a real kick out of seeing it all come together, taking nothing and turning it into something,” he said. “Come to think of it, I’ve done that a lot in my life.”



John Kelly (foreground) has been active in Rouge River cleanup work, and currently is a board member and legal adviser to the Friends of the Rouge nonprofit organization.



A scuba diving enthusiast, Kelly (right) periodically accompanies friends on tropical diving expeditions.

Photos courtesy  
of John Kelly



A home in Ann Arbor has been transformed inside and out by Kelly and his son Jack, owner of landscape firm in Northville.