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TOP BOUTIQUES IN CALIFORNIA 2016



Juliane Backmann / Special to the Daily Journal

From left, Robert E. Strauss, Jonathan S. Forster, Jeffrey P. Geida, Jessica G. Babrick, Gary M. Borofsky, Neil Solarz, Sussan H. Shore, Martin A. Neumann and Blake A. Rummel.

ESTATE PLANNING

Weinstock Manion ALC

Founded by estate planning pioneer Harold Weinstock in 1959, the firm is one of Los Angeles' oldest boutiques. "He pretty much invented estate planning in Los Angeles as we know it today," said shareholder and director Martin A. Neumann. "Harold, or maybe one or two attorneys in LA, they really created a practice that was devoted primarily to estate planning. He was recognized as the consummate estate planner in this city."

Weinstock, who died in 2014 at age 89, founded the firm after leaving his job as a special attorney for the Internal Revenue Service's office of chief counsel. Law partner Brian G. Manion, a business attorney and environmentalist, died in 1997. The firm focuses on estate planning; estate and trust administration; estate and trust litigation; business succession planning; charitable planning; and family foundations. It now has

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16 attorneys.

Before the specialty developed, a family lawyer often drew up a will, even for the ultra wealthy, said shareholder and managing director Sussan H. Shore. But that proved unsatisfactory when the taxman called after a rich person died, seeking taxes of various kinds. "We work very hard to reduce transfer taxes — estate taxes, gift taxes, you name it," Shore said.

An early example of a poorly arranged estate resulted in the protracted fight over Jim Morrison's multimillion-dollar fortune following his 1971 death. The Doors lead singer had a rudimentary will, and there was some evidence of a common law marriage to longtime girlfriend Pamela Courson. There were claims by band members and Courson's parents. The firm, then known as Weinstock, Manion, Reisman, Shore & Neumann,

represented Morrison's parents. "Ultimately, we got a very large victory for Jim Morrison's parents," Shore said.

Morrison is an exception to the rule of confidentiality that cloaks most of Weinstock Manion's estate planning clients. When matters reach the courts, some of them are public, including the estates of Charles David "Mask" Lewis, a mixed martial arts star, and Estelle Getty, matriarch on "The Golden Girls" TV sitcom, and entities such as the Los Angeles Zoo, National Jewish Health research facility and the Muscular Dystrophy Association, Shore said.

Other clients remain undisclosed. "We and they prefer not to name names," Shore said. "Our end of the estate planning practice is highly private, and our clients are highly sensitive. Most of them aren't famous, just rich."

Added shareholder and director Jonathan S. Forster, who designs and implements multigenerational estate planning strategies for high net worth families, "We are looking for ways to

disinherit the government."

Shore and Forster offered a few anonymous examples of their firm's work. For a clothing design manufacturing business founder, the challenge was to transfer to his children ownership of two homes with an aggregate value of \$45 million. "We figured out a way to transfer a significant dollar amount of assets in a way that resulted in no transfer tax," Shore said.

"That's the fun part," Forster said. "We spend a lot of time being creative in moving wealth."

Another client's estate was valued at more than \$70 million and involved complex real estate ownership structures, Shore said. The preparation of the estate tax return included substantial valuation discounts. "Not surprisingly, the IRS audited the estate," Shore said. "This is an example of things we do quite often: putting the best foot forward for clients. Estate tax audits are almost 100 percent certain in cases like this. We and the IRS use appraisers, and to sustain the tax challenges, you have to sustain your appraisal."

Forster said, "We not only got a terrific result with the IRS, we also avoided a property tax reassessment at death. A low property tax base is a real asset, and it takes some planning to keep it low."

The firm also successfully represented eight local and national charities in litigation involving a contractor who took advantage of a wealthy elderly man. It drafted a sophisticated custom plan, including provisions for an oversight committee, a case manager and a patient advocate to endure a special needs child's lifetime well-being.

Now that the estate tax limit is so high, amounting to \$10.9 million for a married couple, not many such cases arise. "Last we heard there were fewer than 5,000 nationally a year," Shore said. "We did a significant number of those."

—John Roemer