

ENTRY LEVEL

Unsatisfied Lawyer Finds Fulfillment Helping Interfaith Families

Edmund Case

Age: 56

First professional job:
Lawyer, Widett & Widett,
Boston

Current job: President, InterfaithFamily.com, Newton, Mass.

I WASN'T ONE OF THOSE PEOPLE who knew early on what they wanted to be when they grew up. I'd majored in political philosophy at Yale University. Unfortunately, the job market for philosophy professors when I graduated in the early 1970s was really bad. I couldn't think of what else I wanted to do. So, I went to law school.

I found the experience very unpleasant. In fact, one of the few things I enjoyed during my time at Harvard Law School was participating in a program called the Harvard Prison Legal Assistance Project, where I had the opportunity to represent prisoners in parole matters and civil cases. It gave me some practical experience, but also enabled me to do something useful with my skills. Looking back, I think I've always wanted to do something meaningful and to help people. I just didn't know it then. It took me another two decades to figure it out.

After graduation, I did what most Harvard Law grads did at the time. I got a job at a business law firm. Three years later, I was hired by another firm, and the pay became very attractive. I quickly found myself stuck in a pair of golden handcuffs, and I stayed for another 19 years.

I didn't hate being a lawyer, but it became very unsatisfying. One of my areas of specialization was securities class-action defense litigation, and much of what happens in those cases is that the lawyers on both sides get rich, but the people who are allegedly wronged don't end up with much. It has no social value, in my opinion. I got very soured on that.

I spent most of my time either working or with my family. The only other thing I was involved with was my synagogue. I was a member of the board, and at some point, because it was known that my wife wasn't Jewish, I was asked to coordinate a discussion group for interfaith couples. I became very interested in the topic.

The reason I feel so strongly about the importance of outreach is because of my own life experiences. Both of my parents came from traditional Jewish families. In fact, I remember my maternal grandfather sitting *shiva* (what Jews do to mourn the death of a relative) when one of my first cousins intermarried. Indeed, my parents made it very clear to me when I was growing up that they wanted me to marry a Jewish woman.

But instead, I fell in love with Wendy Bosworth, an Episcopalian. We had a rocky six-year-long courtship because of my parents' disapproval.



Edmund Case says his work as a class-action lawyer had "no social value," so he decided to go back to school to master nonprofit skills.

When I finally told my parents that we wanted to get married, they asked that we go see my rabbi, a man whom I revered. He was completely disapproving of our relationship and said some very cruel things to Wendy.

We were married by a judge. We didn't even try to find a rabbi, as there were few who would officiate at an interfaith marriage in those days. Once it was clear that we would marry, my parents became very supportive of our relationship, and have been so ever since. Wendy also fully embraced Judaism and formally converted just last year. We've been happily married for 31 years.

Once I'd decided that I no longer wanted to be a lawyer, I realized that what I really cared about most was helping interfaith families feel welcomed by the Jewish community. I wanted to find some way to work in this field.

So after 22 years as a successful attorney, I became a full-time student once again. I entered the Hornstein-Heller dual-degree program at Brandeis University, which culminated in a master of arts degree in Jewish communal service and a master of management. The program allowed me to study intermarriage from a gamut of perspectives—from social psychology and demography to religion and policy—and I loved it.

During the 27-month program, I completed fieldwork placements at both Jewish Family & Children's Service and at Combined Jewish Philanthropies of Greater Boston. One thing I learned from my fieldwork experiences was how to be more sensitive to people's needs and feelings. As a lawyer, I was very much a "just the facts" sort of person. At my law firm, it didn't really matter how people felt, only that the tasks got done.

"If you're not welcoming to interfaith couples who are going to marry anyway, then you are just cutting off your nose to spite your face."

But I learned that that approach doesn't really work in the social-service area.

In fact, my supervisor while at Combined Jewish Philanthropies, Judy Krell, often told me that I was "defective" when it came to "schmaltz." She would critique things I wrote, saying, "This is so cold. You need more schmaltz here. You have to make this nicer." I remember I finally wrote a letter that met her satisfaction and she wrote across the top of it in big red letters: "Great schmaltz!"

That lesson definitely stayed with me, and I've kept that letter as a reminder. I'm definitely much more sensitive to other people's feelings now. In fact, I recently hired a wonderful person to be vice president of marketing and operations at Interfaith Family.com who is extremely businesslike. I find myself telling her: "This is too harsh. You have to soften this, and add some 'schmaltz!'"

Near the end of school, I was introduced to Yosef Abramowitz, chief executive officer of a nonprofit online publisher called Jewish Family & Life, in Newton, Mass. He hired me in 1999 as the organization's executive director and as the publisher of one of its online magazines, Interfaith Family.com.

But I found being part of another organization hampered my ability both to raise funds to support new initiatives and to engage in controversial advocacy work. I decided that to do that would require a separate charitable organization. So a few years later, I registered InterfaithFamily.com as a separate nonprofit entity and raised funds to acquire the Web magazine from Jewish Family & Life, which I did in 2002.

The mission of InterfaithFamily.com is to encourage intermarried families to make Jewish choices for themselves and their children, and to encourage Jewish leaders and institutions to accept and support intermarried families. My feeling is that if you discourage intermarriage or if you're not welcoming to interfaith couples who are going to marry anyway, then you are just cutting off your nose to spite your face. Before a non-Jewish partner will ever feel comfortable raising their child as a member of the Jewish community, they first need to feel accepted by that community themselves.

The statistics show that not enough children from interfaith marriages end up identifying themselves with Jewish culture and religion. The goal of my work is to increase the numbers who do, which I believe is essential to maintaining the size of the Jewish community, and to enriching it. I need only look at my own children—Emily, now 27, and Adam, now 23—to know that interfaith families can and do raise Jewish children with good values and strong Jewish identities.

Many Jewish leaders say that intermarriage is destroying the future of the Jewish population. What motivates my work is proving them wrong. —AS TOLD TO REBECCA GARDYAN