

Michael N. Mercurio

Calming the Chaos

Michael Mercurio obtained a master's degree in international affairs because he wanted to impact the world around him and help calm the chaos on the international stage. "When I graduated, the Balkan and Bosnian Wars were going on, Yugoslavia had broken up, and the Cold War was ending," he recounts today. "I took a job at a think tank, where I wrote and thought a lot about the problems of the world. But I'm a problem solver who likes to be in the trenches, roll up my sleeves, and dive into issues that are here and now. I wanted to make a difference that could be seen and to impact the world today, not just think and write about what we should or could have done. I wanted a career that was hands-on, solutions-oriented, and immediately tangible."

In search of a different kind of chaos to calm, Mike pivoted and earned his law degree. Now a Principal with Offit Kurman, P.A., a full-service law firm serving entrepreneurially-minded clients and families of wealth, he's motivated by the feeling of coming to work every day knowing he helps everyday people solve real problems in real time. "Bringing empathy to chaos is still what drives me, but now, it's immediate impactful solutions to tame the chaos," he says. "When people reach out to our law firm, it's often because something really good or something really bad has happened. Regardless, they are stressed and looking for advice. Their heads are spinning, and they can't sleep at night. I'm incredibly passionate about the fact that my empathy, knowledge, and pragmatic skill set is the thing that can calm them down and bring them some relief. It's very rewarding that my clients can sleep at night again knowing I've got their back." Mike takes this relationship of pure trust very seriously.

Offit Kurman was launched thirty years ago by Ted and Maurice Offit and Howard Kurman as a Baltimore County general practice

firm of solid, reliable lawyers specializing in the core practice areas often sought by businesses and individuals. From those beginnings, the firm added skillsets, practice areas, and industry knowledge like government contracting, evolving into a one-stop-shop for all legal needs. From transactional such as corporate, employment, and intellectual property, to litigation such as business disputes, domestic disputes, and insurance recovery, the firm works with entrepreneurs and families of wealth to assist with their life cycle needs and help families achieve their goals.

Ted, a shrewd businessman and entrepreneur in addition to being an excellent lawyer, had envisioned targeting the lower middle market, entrepreneurially-driven business niche as a full-service local firm alternative to the big DC and Baltimore firms. "We've settled on that niche, so we don't chase the larger clients like Under Armour or IBM," Mike explains. "Small and mid-sized entrepreneurial businesses are our focus."

Ted Offit's vision proved a powerful one, and since the day Mike came onboard as the firm's twelfth attorney in 2003, he watched it expand to 135 attorneys today. It grew from a single office in Baltimore County to twelve offices along the corridor from Northern Virginia to New York, earning it a regular spot on the Inc. 5000 list of fastest growing companies. "I think we've been so successful because we match the entrepreneurial mindset of our clients," Mike points out. "In simple terms, a lawyer's job is to manage risk. When you're dealing with an entrepreneurial clientele that regularly accepts all sorts of risks, traditional legal approaches can clash. But we're very adept at understanding and respecting the elevated risk tolerance of our clients. We don't try to convince them to care about a risk when they don't. Instead, we see our role as shedding light on



the risks that exist so our clients can decide for themselves whether they care about them or not. We believe in cutting out nonsense and giving our clients what they want, without all the extra baggage they often face in working with other firms that don't understand the entrepreneurial frame of mind."

Offit Kurman's success also stems from the caliber and experience of the attorneys it hires. Most come from big law firms where they've already cut their teeth and gotten substantial experience under their belts. They come onboard ready to take on the often unpredictable and inconsistent legal issues that arise with their clients, from employment issues to succession planning. "We're not a training ground," Mike affirms. "When our clients come to us, they don't get someone who's learning on their dollar. They get someone who's been around the block—someone who already has a lot of tools in their toolbox to address their needs, and can do so at an effective price point."

Mike specializes in corporate transactions, heading his firm's practice in this regard. He focuses most his time on the life cycle issues of his clients, especially end stage considerations such as mergers and acquisitions, succession and equity transfers. In the summer of 2016, Mike took on the challenge of building out the transactional practice of the firm's Tyson's Corner office, using his leadership and networking skills to obtain market share in the area. "I enjoy working with business owners, especially driven leaders who have put their businesses on a growth curve that's evolving toward a conclusion, like a sale," he says. "I enjoy the transactional side of law and the work of M&A deals, as opposed to litigating, which can be adversarial and destructive. Rather, it's about building something and working with people who are incredibly smart, creative, and innovative when it comes to making money and changing the world. From companies that make drones, to companies that do up-dos for wedding parties, it's amazing to see the visions of these entrepreneurs, who are truly the engines that drive this country."

As a leader at the firm and within the community, Mike is known for his genuine, passionate, straightforward manner, where what you see is what you get. He treats a receptionist the same way he'd treat the CEO of a \$200 million company—a hallmark of his upbringing in a traditional home with strong values in a suburb of

Philadelphia. "My parents taught me to be down to earth," he says. "They're still alive today and have been married for over fifty years. They always taught us to do what we say and mean what we say. They were great role models, showing us that our word is our bond and that it's important to go out of your way for your dedication to family and to doing what's right. And they always follow through to the end."

Mike's father, always quick-witted, spontaneous, and fun, worked for Unysis, a global information technology company that often sent him to Asia to work on Air Force contracts and procurements in Japan, Korea, and Taiwan. He enjoyed a good party and a cigar, was very passionate about sports, and rarely worried about anything. Mike's mother, on the other hand, was more reserved and refined. She graduated second in her high school class, but her parents—first generation Italians from the old country—had already sent her older sister to college, and weren't able to pay to educate another girl. So Mike's mother was left to sacrifice her professional potential for the good of her family, staying at home to raise Mike and his younger brother and sister until they entered high school. She always considered it her calling, and took great pride in the role. When her kids were older, she took a job with Merck & Co.

Growing up in a duplex with his cousins living next door, sports were a big thing for Mike's family, as they were for most families in Philadelphia. "We lived and died by the Eagles, the Phillies, and the Flyers," he reflects fondly. He played baseball, basketball, and football, laying the foundation for many of the sports analogies he would later use as a businessman. "My father coached my baseball team, and I remember many happy days on the field together," he says.

The Mercurios were a very traditional, Catholic family, and Mike attended parochial schools all the way through undergraduate school. Despite their love of sports, his parents made sure that academics always came first, and good grades came relatively easily to Mike. As a young kid, he was at times shy and reserved, though he grew into a more outgoing and aggressive leader over time.

When Mike was in fifth grade, the family moved to Herndon, Virginia, where his father was transferred for work. The transition was difficult at first, but soon showed its silver lining as Mike

made new friends and came to know the area. His Italian American neighborhood in Philadelphia had been relatively homogenous, and the international flare of the DC metropolitan area struck a whole new cord with him. "I spent a lot of time visiting the city and going to museums, and I met a lot of international movers and shakers," he says. "We attended President Reagan's inauguration, and I still remember the parade. I cultivated a deep appreciation for the cosmopolitan nature of the city."

After his freshman year of high school, the family decided to move back to the Philadelphia area. "I was really gaining momentum and doing well in Northern Virginia," he laughs. "But we integrated well at our new school in Lansdale, Pennsylvania." There, Mike played varsity baseball and lettered in multiple sports. He also got a job at a pizza place, joined clubs at school, and participated in the honors program. The interest in international affairs sparked by his time in DC was further cultivated by joining Model UN and working with a particularly passionate history teacher, who encouraged his pursuit of politics and global issues. He also appreciated his baseball coach, who taught him that sports come down to having the confidence to play your best and not hold back.

Upon graduating from high school, Mike enrolled at the University of Scranton, a Jesuit school, where he got a Bachelor's of Science in International Affairs. He worked as a waiter and a bartender, and when he graduated, he took a semester off to save money and work in construction. "I learned a lot about the value of hard manual labor, and that I didn't want to spend the rest of my life doing that kind of work," he says. "Many of my fellow workers would get paid Friday afternoon, head to the bar, and were broke by Monday morning. It was a sad lifestyle."

Instead, Mike decided to pursue international affairs in graduate school and returned to the city that had catalyzed his love for the subject in the first place—Washington, DC. He enrolled in American University's School of International Service, hoping to serve his country through a career in the State Department or the CIA. The program afforded him an opportunity to visit South Korea on a Congressional Exchange Program—an experience reminiscent of the business trips he saw his father take when he was young.

Working full-time to cover the cost of school, Mike graduated on time with a masters in international affairs and a minor in technology, and took the job at the think tank. But two years was all it took for him to reassess the best context for his skills, recalibrate to a path that could solve more immediate problems, and he pivoted to the American University, Washington College of Law. He took classes at night and found a day job as a paralegal and clerk at a law firm, which was extremely useful in putting the theoretical and conceptual lessons of his coursework into action. He then landed another clerkship at another large law firm, Epstein Becker Green, and stayed on as an associate after graduating. "I spent my first couple of years bouncing around several different practice areas, but I knew I wanted to eventually work in business," says Mike. "I was always intrigued by the stock market and what truly makes a business tick."

Mike worked a short stint at Gallagher Evelius & Jones LLP doing tax and low income credit work, and then decided to make the jump to business when he became the first corporate associate hire at a small firm in Bethesda. There, he spent a year working for the named partner and did a great job—until the partner decided he was ready to semi-retire. He had absolutely no negative critique of Mike's work, but because of his life decisions, Mike was let go. "Through no fault of my own, and after a great performance review, I was laid off, with a wife and kids to support," he says. "No matter how hard I worked, my destiny was tied to someone else's life decisions. It taught me that I had to be the captain of my own ship because I never wanted my success to be controlled by the whims of others. From then on, I focused on developing my own book of business and creating my own practice."

From then on, Mike built a practice despite having comparatively few connections in the DC area, gaining each client through hard work, commitment, and hustle. He accepted the job at Offit Kurman, and under Ted Offit's excellent mentorship, he was a sponge. Success at work stemmed in large part from mastering the art of truly delivering what the client asks for—something easier said than done. "I call it the 'good enough' standard," he says. "You can put in a lot of time to go above and beyond for a client or a partner, but those efforts often backfire because what you end up delivering is not what they hired

you to do. It's important to be a good listener and deliver exactly what's asked of you, not what you think they need or want, and not what you would want."

By that point, Mike had become single but was blessed to have a young son and a daughter to raise. Determined to make the most of the situation, Mike embraced his role as the single father of two young children. And when the children spent time with their mother, his time was freed up to focus on work more than he might have been able to do in a traditional family environment. "I remember having to figure out how to braid my daughter's hair and get her ballerina costumes," he laughs. "When my kids were with me, I was wholly present. And when they weren't, I could be wholly present with work. It was a tremendously defining experience for me, being a single dad while building a practice. I count myself as very fortunate to have been successful with both."

Then, in 2008, Mike met Liz. By that time, he had learned a lot about relationships, and about himself. He knew not to rush into anything, and he knew what he really wanted out of a partner. "We're very similar in that we like to do everything together, but we also complement each other in every way," he says. "She's my partner and the rock that keeps me grounded. We really get each other. Liz has two daughters, and we worked carefully to blend our families into a wonderful unit." Liz and Mike got married on the beach in 2014, surrounded by family and friends—a day that he remembers as one of the happiest of his life.

Perhaps their greatest strength as a couple is their spontaneity—a trait that allows them to truly live life to the fullest together. They enjoy outdoor enthusiast activities such as riding motorcycles and ATVs, scuba diving, and shooting together, while also enjoying the finer pursuits like attending live music shows, festivals, wine and bourbon tasting, and travel. They are also generous with their time for their children's and extended families' activities. Mike also plays competitive ice hockey—a sport he loves for its fast pace and action-packed speed—and is a long-

standing season ticket holder for the Philadelphia Flyers.

In advising young people entering the working world today, Mike underscores the importance of working hard and working smart. "You don't have to reinvent the wheel," he says. "All the knowledge you need to be successful in the world is already out there—you just have to discover it. That means you've got to be a good listener, and you've got to be coachable. Know that you don't know it all, and listen to the people who are willing to mentor you."

Beyond that, his story shows the power of staying true to your driving force, but remaining flexible enough to find the context that best fits your strengths and interests. Had he stuck with the international affairs think tank world, he may have wrestled the rest of his career with an ambiguous form of chaos that could never really be tamed in a sense that would be rewarding to him. Instead, he took a risk and found a path that affords the face-to-face effects of his efforts, and is a better lawyer and entrepreneur because of it. "Because of my work, people in my community sleep better at night," he says. "They're happier, more effective, and more successful as leaders and job creators, and to me, that's the most rewarding part of all."

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President and founder of Bernhardt Wealth Management and author of Profiles in Success: Inspiration from Executive Leaders in the Washington D.C. Area, Gordon provides financial planning and wealth management services to affluent individuals, families and business-owners throughout the Washington, DC area. Since establishing his firm in 1994, he and his team have been focused on providing high-quality service and independent financial advice to help clients make informed decisions about their money. For more information, visit www.BernhardtWealth.com and [Gordon's Blog](#).