

# FAMILY PRACTICE

## The Sears Takeover

When Ross A. Sears enrolled at the University of Houston Law School in the late '60s, he never thought he would be launching a legal dynasty that has extended over three generations.

"I was extremely proud when my brother, John Terry Sears, followed in my footsteps, then my wife, Mariann, before we were married, one of my daughters-in-law, Victoria Frank Sears, my sons, Ross A. Sears II and Terry H. Sears, and finally my first grandchild, Samantha Sears," said Ross, who retired as a justice of the Texas 14th Court of Appeals in 1994.

After retiring from the bench, he turned to acting, appearing in five feature films, including an Italian movie and many television shows and TV commercials, including one for the French automaker Peugeot. His most recent commercials were for Blue Bell ice cream and Denny's, which aired in 2014 and 2015.

Before turning to the law, Ross attended Del Mar College in Corpus Christi, joined the Air Force during the Korean war, where he served as a radar operator on an amphibian rescue plane and was decorated for taking part in a rescue mission, earned "All-Star" honors in the Air Force football team, and turned down collegiate football scholarships to concentrate on academics and finish his college degree at The University of Texas. Leaving Austin behind, he went to work for the Sunbeam Corp. in Chicago and later Minneapolis, continuing his love of football by playing semi-pro in both cities.

Ross' interest in law was sparked in Chicago when the driver for a city councilman ran into his car, and he was given a traffic ticket.

"I could not afford a lawyer so I went to the library and studied the municipal ordinances and found three violations committed by the other driver," Ross said. "I went to trial and won."

Later in Minneapolis, he again went to court and beat another traffic ticket. He also got permission from the court to argue for a friend and won that case as well. That is what set him on the path to law school after being out of college for 12 years and working in sales.

In the summer of 1968 with a wife, two sons, and two step-children,



Three generations and seven members of the Sears family have graduated, or will graduate, from the University of Houston Law Center (from left to right): Daughter-in-law Victoria Frank Sears '90, son Ross A. Sears II '91, Patriarch Judge Ross A. Sears '70, wife, Mariann Sears '83, behind him, son, Terry H. Sears '93, granddaughter Samantha Sears 1L.

Ross enrolled in the UH Bates College of Law and graduated in 1970. He was an active member of the Order of the Barons and won the American Jurisprudence award in Contracts, Insurance, and Admiralty Law.

"I remember when my sons were two and four years of age they would come in and tell me good night while I was studying. After they were in bed, I would go out and sell mortgage cancellation insurance to support my family and then

come home and study again," he said.

John Terry Sears followed his brother's path, receiving his J.D. in 1972 and practicing solo until he passed away in 2003 at the age of 65.

Mariann entered the University of Houston Law School in August 1980 and received her J.D. in 1983. Soon after graduating, she worked as a briefing attorney with the 14th Court of Appeals, where she met Justice Sears. They will be celebrating their 29th wedding anniversary in August.

It was her love of writing and legal research that led Mariann to become the first female director of the Harris County Law Library where she oversaw the library's relocation in 2013 and, most recently, planned and hosted the library's Centennial Celebration in October.

"Both Ross II and Terry told me at an early age that they wanted to be attorneys," the justice said of his two sons.

After graduating from the University of Houston with a B.S. in psychology in 1998, Ross II followed his father's footsteps and went on to UHLC along with his college sweetheart, Victoria Frank.

The two met at UH during her senior year and discovered they both planned to go to law school. They became engaged her final year of law school.

One day, the couple and a law school friend, Clay Crawford, were at school when the question of whose family name the couple would go by once they were married came up for debate. "Like any good feminist, I was contending that it was unreasonable to just expect me to change my last name," said Victoria. "The debate ensued, and it was finally agreed that we would flip a coin to determine if

he would take my last name or if I would take his. Like good law students, we quickly drafted a contract setting out the terms.”

Crawford was moderating the event, the coin was flipped, and Victoria won.

“The family name would be my maiden name, ‘Frank.’ While I was dancing around the advocate’s office, gloating, Clay quickly scooped up the ‘contract,’ popped it into his mouth and ate the evidence,” she said.

“My focus through law school was always family law and domestic violence studies,” said Victoria.

After graduating from UHLC in 1990, she immediately began working for the family law firm of Short and Jenkins, and in 1991, soon after Ross II graduated, they were married, and Victoria kept her maiden name. Their children, Mackenzie, now 19, and Madison, now 16, carried the Sears surname. As a surprise for her husband on their 10th wedding anniversary, Victoria had her name legally changed to Sears with Crawford representing her at the courthouse.

Victoria worked for Pollicoff, Smith, Myers & Remels when she realized that two practicing lawyers and two young children was not going to work, so she became a stay-at-home mom. While at home, she started a women’s custom accessory business, and her handbags and belts were written up in Women’s Wear Daily Dallas and showcased at the Dallas and Los Angeles Market Centers. She is currently working with Ross at Williamson, Sears & Rusnak LLP doing litigation support work.

After graduating from the Law Center in 1991, Ross II worked for an insurance defense firm for three years and then left to work with Jimmy Williamson PC, which later became Williamson and Sears. He left that firm and formed Sears Crawford LLP until January 2015 when he and Williamson rejoined forces and formed the firm of Williamson, Sears & Rusnak.

“I wanted to go to law school since I was in diapers,” said Ross II. “My best memories growing up are hunting year after year with my dad and all his lawyer friends and law partners.”

Like his older brother, uncle, and dad, Terry H. Sears also wanted to follow the family tradition, and after graduating from the University of Houston in 1989 with a B.S. in psychology, he entered the University of Houston Law Center.

“My father impressed upon me at an early age in high school to attend either medical school or law school,” Terry said. “I chose law school over medical school as I was married and law school was several years shorter than medical school, and my brother, Ross II, attending law school a couple of years ahead of me, made the dream of attending law school and becoming a lawyer more reachable.”

While in law school, Terry played intramural football for three years and boasts that his law school team was undefeated against the School of Optometry. In his third year, his wife, Cherry, gave birth to their daughter, Samantha, and six years later to their son, Taylor.

After graduating in 1993, he taught Legal Negotiations at UHLC in the evening as an adjunct professor while working with a small real estate firm.

“Working two jobs while married and with two children was challenging,” he said, “but Cherry and I will celebrate 32 years of marriage this summer.” Terry’s fondest memories from law school were the study sessions with Jody and Pat, both guys, and the lifelong friendships made with several of his classmates.

In 2009 Terry and Joel Bennett, a law school friend, formed Sears and Bennett LLP and in 2016 expanded the firm to Sears, Bennett and Gerdes, LLP.

The Sears legal and Law Center dynasty continues with first-year law student Samantha Sears, the first grandchild of the judge. “I highly value helping others in my private life, and I wanted to come to law school so helping others could be the focus of my professional life as well,” she said. “I’ve seen how hard my family has worked all their lives, and it inspired me to follow in their footsteps.”

Growing up in a family of lawyers and seeing how people trusted her dad with their problems and how much he could help them, convinced her to follow in his footsteps. “It is quite an honor to have your child attend the same law school that you did,” Terry said. “I am sure that my father, Judge Sears, is equally if not more proud that not only did both of his children attend the University of Houston Law Center, but his first grandchild has chosen to attend UHLC as well.”

Samantha graduated with a B.S. in psychology, as did her dad and uncle Ross, from Texas Christian University. Samantha is interested in several areas of law, but this summer she will be able to narrow her options when she splits her summer working for Kent Schaffer at Bires, Schaffer & DeBorde and Cokinos, Boisen & Young.

She is currently involved at the Law Center, as a LexisNexis student ambassador, a member of the Christian Legal Society and Student Bar Association, a player for the law school co-ed volleyball intramural team, and elected 1L representative for section A.

“It’s very special for me and my family that we get to share the same law school and profession we love, with the people we love,” said Samantha. “Getting to carry on my family’s legacy at UHLC has been an honor that I will cherish for the rest of my life.”



John Terry Sears, '72