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BY MILO SMITH



“SOMETIMES I GET A LITTLE STRESSED OUT BECAUSE I THINK I’VE GOT A LOT ON MY PLATE.”

—DR. MARK MONASKY

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e have probably all had that thought at some point in our busy lives. We are familiar with the feeling of juggling so many things that our stress level rises with every item added to the to-do list.

For Dr. Mark Monasky, '02, to say that he has a lot on his plate is more than an understatement. Monasky is a neurosurgeon at St. Alexis Medical Center in Bismarck, N.D., who has performed more than 3,000 surgeries. But neurosurgery is now his part-time job as he spends most of his time as a partner in a law firm.

Monasky, a New York native, is a graduate of Columbia University College of Physicians & Surgeons in New York City. He completed neurosurgical training at the Mayo Clinic and University of Maryland, and moved to Bismarck in 1993 to practice neurosurgery. Monasky says people often ask him why he went to law school after all the schooling and training he went through to become a doctor. Like many college students, he says he struggled with what career to pursue. “I always thought about going to law school,” Monasky says. “But you can’t do everything, so I went to medical school and became a neurosurgeon, which was one of my dreams.”

Monasky recalls a nagging thought that he still wanted to go to law school someday. Like many of his colleagues, he went through a medical lawsuit which heightened his interest in law. “So I took the plunge,” Monasky says, and he began taking classes at the University of North Dakota School of Law in 1999.

Like many college students, Monasky had a part-time job during his days in Grand Forks. His job, though, was a little more involved than delivering pizzas or waiting tables. Monasky would drive back to Bismarck to perform neurosurgery on weekends. He says it’s “all a blur” when he thinks back on those days as a law student at UND. “I made over 100 round trips over the three years,” Monasky recalls of his drives to Bismarck on weekends to perform surgeries and spend time with his wife.

Being close to Bismarck was part of his decision to attend North Dakota’s only law school, but Monasky says he got a quality education. “I don’t have any regrets at all about going to UND,” he says. “It prepared me very well for what I’m doing right now.”



Top: Mark Monasky, '92, seated right, is a partner with **Bormann, Myerchin, Monasky & Espeseth, LLP.** **Left: Dr. Monasky** is also a neurosurgeon at St. Alexis Hospital in Bismarck.



Photo by: St. Alexis Hospital

Now, he combines his passion for medicine with his new career as an attorney specializing in estate planning. Monasky deliberately chose a legal niche that did not involve health care law or medical malpractice. "When I'm outside of the hospital I want to do something completely unrelated to medicine," Monasky says.

Monasky majored in mathematics as an undergrad and is comfortable working with numbers. His desire to help his fellow physicians protect what they have sacrificed so much to achieve made estate and asset protection planning the obvious choice, he says. After passing the bar exam in 2002, Monasky went back to neurosurgery full-time. It was 2008 before he joined the Bismarck law firm now known as Bormann, Myerchin, Monasky & Espeseth,

LLP, and began to focus on helping fellow physicians, business owners, and others protect and transfer their assets.

"As I practiced [medicine] longer and longer, it became apparent to me that doctors have no business or financial training," Monasky says. "They don't have the background or time to research these issues. Frankly, some are taken advantage of because physicians are very trusting people."

While it's not brain surgery, it sometimes can seem pretty difficult getting physicians to go to a lawyer. Monasky says just about every experience a doctor has with an attorney is a negative one, so they have a skewed view of the profession. But Monasky says his background gives him instant credibility with doctors. "A lot of physicians don't trust lawyers," he points out. "People outside of medicine have no idea how doctors think. I know how doctors think. I continue to work in the trenches with my fellow doctors, and know what it's like to be in the emergency or operating room at two in the morning."

That inside knowledge has landed him a number of physician clients in the few years he's been practicing law. Monasky says he has gotten so busy in the law firm that in January he cut back his neurosurgical coverage from every third weekend to one weekend a month. Monasky's weekends extend from Thursday morning to Monday morning, including a full clinic day on Thursday and an



Photo by: St. Alexis Hospital

Dr. Monasky has performed more than 3,000 surgeries since coming to Bismarck in 1993. His days in the operating room, though, may be numbered.

operating day on Friday. He envisions a time when he might give up the operating room for good. That, however, will not be an easy decision to make.

“I wrestle with it every day,” Monasky says of ending his dual career lifestyle. “It’s hard to cut that umbilical cord. I love neurosurgery. It has been my life and passion. But now I have a second passion.” With his law practice taking off, his medical career may end “sooner, rather than later.” Monasky says, “After a few weeks in the law office, I can’t wait to get back into the operating room, but by Monday morning I’m tired and look forward to going back to the law firm where I don’t carry a pager and am guaranteed a full night’s sleep.”

For now, Monasky is in rare company as a doctor who is also an attorney. He says there are about 1,500 to 2,000 doctors with law degrees in the United States. Of those, there are only about six neurosurgeons. Monasky is not aware of any other physician/attorney in the country who does full-time estate planning. “It is extremely unusual,” Monasky says, “but I don’t have a lot of time to focus on it. Sometimes I get a little stressed out because I think I have too much on my plate. But I’ve always been a hard worker and I love challenges.”

As a reflection of his own beliefs, Monasky says he always brings up charitable giving when estate planning with a client. He uses the argument that a person’s heirs will likely not miss 10 percent of the estate. “But by leaving that amount to charity, that’s going to be more of a statement to your kids,” Monasky says of his argument for giving. “It’s a powerful way to leave a legacy, to leave some assets to charity.”

Monasky says the estate can be set up to allow heirs to decide the charity to which the money will go. “Hopefully, that will make them more charitably inclined,” he reasons. “What’s the point of accumulating a big estate if you are not going to use that to benefit some charitable causes?”

For now, Monasky is charting his own legacy. He’s taking his ideas for helping doctors plan for their financial futures nationwide, launching a company and website dedicated to the principles he preaches (www.mdwealthprotector.com). “I’m really excited about the potential of where this might go,” Monasky says.

It’s an expansion of lectures and seminars for doctors he’s been giving in recent months. “The interest has been incredible,” he says. “Doctors are just starved for this type of information, and constantly tell me how refreshing it is for someone to provide them financial and asset protection education without the hard sell just to make a commission. And there’s nobody in the country addressing this at a national level.”

So, brain surgery is less on his brain these days, but for now he continues to lead a double life. “People ask me all the time which I like the most,” Monasky says. “And I have two children and my answer is the same as if someone asked me which I love the most. ‘I love them both.’ I feel very blessed in my lifetime. Most people don’t have the privilege or the financial liberty to be able to pursue another profession. I think a lot of people would be able to do it, they just don’t have the financial freedom to do it.” **AR**