

**Real Estate** A Special Report

## Not Your Father's Law Firm

Motorcycles and rock 'n' roll define the look of Gilbert Heintz & Randolph.

BY JENNA GREENE

If the Hard Rock Cafe and a white shoe law firm had a love child, the result would look a lot like Gilbert Heintz & Randolph.

In the reception area are two gleaming motorcycles, a Ducati and a Harley-Davidson. On the walls throughout the 54-lawyer firm are framed album covers signed by the likes of the Who, Bruce Springsteen, and the Grateful Dead, as well as guitars autographed by B.B. King and Carlos Santana. The firm's game room (yes, game room) is furnished with two pinball machines, a plasma TV, and a big-screen TV, complete with an Xbox and a selection of games.

Still, this isn't exactly a law firm of slackers. A highly profitable insurance recovery boutique, Gilbert Heintz's clients include Pfizer Inc., America Online Inc., and the Host Marriott Corp. First-year associates there start at \$140,000—\$15,000 above the going rate in the District. Last year, the firm did so well that everyone—lawyers, staff, and their families—was treated to an all-expenses-paid four-day vacation in Puerto Rico.

"Work hard, play hard" is the philosophy of name partner Scott Gilbert, who personally acquired most of the firm's collection of art and memorabilia, scouring Washington's galleries and hunting for pieces during his frequent business trips to New York, North Carolina, New Orleans, and beyond.

In decorating the seventh-floor offices at 1100 New York Ave., N.W., Gilbert says it was important to him that "all the art has some significance to somebody."

"We did not design the space to make a statement," he says. "We designed it to be space we enjoy working in and that has some meaning for us."

Still, a moment later, the 50-year-old managing partner, clad in blue jeans and black cowboy boots, with a small silver hoop in one ear, can't resist adding, "It's very important to be cool. We're not a dorky firm."

At a basic level, Gilbert says, there is a connection between the way the office looks and the way the lawyers there approach



**REBEL WITH A J.D.:** Gilbert Heintz name partner Scott Gilbert says motorcycles are in his blood—he has seven of them at home. The firm's collection of rock 'n' roll memorabilia includes a guitar signed by B.B. King.



the practice of law. As counsel to corporations suing their insurance companies over payment on policies, the firm's lawyers have ample opportunity to use contingent fees and other creative

billing arrangements, as well as a range of alternative dispute resolution techniques. Other times, they bill by the hour and rely on straightforward litigation.

“We do things the way we think they should be done, not necessarily the way they have always been done,” Gilbert says. “We may use very conservative methods and adhere to tradition if it makes sense. Other times we forge ahead with a completely new approach that’s never been tried before.”

The décor is a similar mix. The individual lawyers’ offices look like, well, lawyers’ offices—desk, computer, phone, bookcase, credenza, views out the windows of downtown D.C.

But the public spaces—with their clean, spare lines and black leather furniture designed by Klaus Vergen of Epic Furniture Group, plus the showcase motorcycles and one-of-a-kind rock ’n’ roll artifacts—are far less conventional.

The effect can be disarming for both clients and visiting lawyers.

“The conservative corporate client walks in and says, ‘Wow! I remember when I had one of these,’” Gilbert says of the motorcycles, which are displayed in front of a lighted wall of opaque glass and have the beauty of 600-pound steel sculptures. As for opposing counsel, Gilbert says, they have been known to pose for snapshots in front of the bikes.

Longtime client John Rigas, general counsel of Armstrong Holdings Inc., says he was taken by surprise the first time he walked into the office and saw the motorcycles, but says he finds the look consistent with the lawyers that he knows.

“It’s very unique and cool and interesting,” he says. “It certainly does reflect the personality not only of Scott, but of the firm itself.”

Agrees Williams & Connolly partner Robert Barnett, who has worked with Gilbert as co-counsel: “Scott, like his décor, is colorful, different, and powerful.”

### THEIR WAY

When Gilbert Heintz moved into its offices in June 2002, the firm initially hired a designer—and then promptly fired her.

“That’s why there’s some personality to [the office],” Gilbert chuckles. Law firm space all looks the same, he continues. “It’s very traditional and very boring, and doesn’t say anything about the people who inhabit it.”

However, the firm did use designer Jerry Begley of Dawson Begley Design to create the game room, an inviting space made cozy by heavy floor-to-ceiling drapes in a burnt-orange silk blend and striped sofas in rich natural tones.

The previous tenant, Silver, Freedman & Taff, used the space as a library, but Gilbert notes that these days, with the explosion of electronic information, the firm has “relatively few books” and even less need for them. A game room seemed like better use of the space.

On a recent afternoon, it was occupied by a firm employee eating a sandwich and watching “Of Mice and Men” on the plasma TV. At the other end of the room, three staff members were holding a meeting, legal pads in hand.

In one corner, the “Lord of the Rings” and “Addams Family” pinball machines flashed silently. The most avid player in the firm, Gilbert adds, is a woman, “a middle-aged, very articulate and proper secretary,” who has been spotted in front of the machines on Saturday afternoons.

### ACRES OF WHITE WALLS

Gilbert got his start at one of the city’s most traditional firms, Covington & Burling. But even there his penchant for blue jeans and motorcycles was well-known. In 1997, Gilbert left Covington, a departure that was noisy and acrimonious—both sides hired lawyers to handle the transfer of client files.

He moved to Dickstein Shapiro Morin & Oshinsky. In late 2000, Gilbert—and his eight-figure book of business—left Dickstein. He teamed up with John Heintz from Howrey Simon

Arnold & White and Jerome Randolph from Cincinnati’s Keating, Muething and Klekamp, plus Dickstein partners David Killalea, Rachel Kronowitz, Bette Orr, Mark Packman, and Richard Shore to launch Gilbert Heintz & Randolph in January 2001.

“Deep down, it’s every lawyer’s dream to hang out a shingle,” Gilbert says. “I’m lucky and blessed.”

As an added bonus, the brand-new office meant acres of white wall space to fill, a task which Gilbert has embraced with gusto.

On one wall he’s collected a series of portraits of rock stars by Gregory Ward. Song lyrics make up the background of each picture. Among those featured: Jimi Hendrix, Bob Dylan, John Lennon, Jim Morrison, Jerry Garcia, and Bruce Springsteen.

Another wall has a collection of signed, framed album covers including “Led Zeppelin II”; the Who’s “Who’s Next”; Eric Clapton’s “Slowhand”; and the Grateful Dead’s “Wake of the Flood.” (Gilbert says his favorite band is the Dead, and although he’s been to more than a dozen of their shows, he says he was never an actual follow-the-band-around-the-country-sell-



ing-tie-dyed-T-shirts-Deadhead.) What's missing, though, are any musicians who debuted after about 1979—Gilbert calls the 1980s “the worst decade ever for music.”

In another hallway is a poster for the 1969 film “Easy Rider” autographed by Jack Nicholson, Peter Fonda, and Dennis Hopper. And in Gilbert's office is a giant Eddie Kramer photograph of Jimi Hendrix, who, as Gilbert points out, is smoking both a cigarette and a joint.

A wry sense of humor is evident as well. In one of the conference rooms, above the black leather chairs designed by BMW, hangs a three-panel acrylic-on-canvas triptych, also by Gregory Ward, that consists entirely of the phrase “blah blah blah” lettered over and over again. “It's very appropriate,” Gilbert says.

In addition to the rock 'n' roll art, the firm has a sizeable collection of photographs by Christopher Burkett, who has been described by critics as the Ansel Adams of color photography.

The Burkett photos are partner Bette Orr's favorites. “Like nature, [the photographs] change with the light and the time of day,” she says.

In general, Orr says, the firm's partners—14 altogether—have indulged Gilbert's passion for collecting.

As for Gilbert, he describes their reaction as “mildly interested and mildly concerned. I'd reappear from trips, and there would be a truckload of things shipped to the firm.”

### **In His Blood**

It is the motorcycles in the reception area that draw the most attention and have become something of a trademark for Gilbert Heintz & Randolph.

In a one-page laminated essay found next to the obligatory copies of *The Wall Street Journal*, *The New York Times*, and *The*

*Washington Post* on the coffee table in the reception area, Gilbert explains their appeal.

“Although certainly not for everyone, motorcycles are in my blood. My grandfather, a Russian immigrant, married my grandmother and promptly spent his life savings on a Harley. My dad for the longest time refused to date my mom after she broke the buddy seat on his Indian early in their relationship. I rode a motorcycle through most of high school until my bike was totaled by a drunk driver; I then commuted to college on a motorcycle purchased after trading in my high school graduation gift.”

Gilbert has seven motorcycles at home, which he rides to work on a rotating basis. The two on display, though, have never been ridden and likely never will be, he says.

The red Ducati MH900E is a rarity—No. 666 of 2,000 bikes hand-assembled by Ducati in 2001. The silver 2002 Harley-Davidson V Rod was developed jointly with Porsche and is the most powerful street motorcycle ever produced by Harley-Davidson.

The firm's Web site, designed by Swati Agrawal of Firmseek, deftly incorporates the Ducati. The opening page shows the bike from the rider's view—speedometer, windscreen, open road, and a moving sky in the rear-view mirror. “Taking a Different Path,” it says.

“Whether you ride them, admire them as art, or are annoyed by them on the street, motorcycles evoke passions in all of us,” Gilbert writes. Likewise, as the firm says on its Web site, “We never say law is a tough business. We believe that so long as you are passionate about your profession, you can't have too much fun.” ■

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