

Maryland Lawyer

News and analysis of legal matters in Maryland

Major changes in law and life

Curlett, Levin join forces to form firm specializing in criminal defense work

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Two weeks ago, Charles N. “Chad” Curlett Jr. moved offices and started a new business. By Tuesday, he is expecting the birth of his third child.

Curlett, 40, a lawyer who started a partnership with attorney Steven Levin on Nov. 21, is used to this kind of chaos.

The last few weeks are nothing compared to a three-week stretch in 2005, when he left his job at the Manhattan District Attorney’s Office, got married, went on a honeymoon, moved from New York to Baltimore and started as an associate at **Saul Ewing LLP**.

Levin, 44, is also used to challenges. He established a small firm a few years ago with Stephanie Gallagher, who is now a U.S. magistrate judge, after both left the **U.S. Attorney’s Office** in Baltimore.

Then as now, the economy was rocky. That was in October 2008, just after a very wild month on the stock market that saw the collapse of Lehman Bros.

But they decided to go for it, and their firm found a way to flourish. Criminal defense work does not seem to suffer in the same ways that other areas of the law do: People still find themselves in trouble and in need of an attorney.

“It turned out very well because when the economy is in such a bad situation, people aren’t just looking for good lawyers, but good lawyers with good prices,” Levin said.

Fast-forward a few years to last April, when Gallagher departed for the federal bench. Levin had the office space — occupying former Gov. Robert L. Ehrlich Jr.’s old corner office in **Womble Carlyle Sandridge and Rice LLP**’s offices on West Pratt Street — and he had the work, which has been piling up in Gallagher’s absence.

Curlett was ready for a change; Levin was looking for a new partner. And creating a partnership with Levin would mean that Curlett could get into court more and represent individuals instead of mostly corporate clients.

Room at the top?

Now, Curlett’s goal is to have the name of the new firm, **Levin & Curlett LLC**, roll off the tongue automatically when people think of the top criminal defense attorneys in town.

“I think that our first priority is going to be establishing a reputation for excellence in our area of practice ...,” he said. “At the end of the day, you can be cost-effective or slightly lower-priced than someone else, but what people want — particularly when the stakes are as high as they are in criminal matters — are excellent lawyers.”

What he thinks will allow the firm to rise to the top quickly is an opening in the criminal bar in Baltimore.

Curlett cited the retirement last year of attorney Dale Kelberman, who helped represent former Mayor Sheila Dixon in her corruption trial, from **Miles & Stockbridge P.C.**, as well as Gregg Bernstein’s move from **Zuckerman Spaeder LLP** to become Baltimore City State’s Attorney.

Martin S. Himeles Jr., managing partner of **Zuckerman Spaeder**’s Baltimore office, disagreed somewhat with Curlett’s reasoning.

“I don’t think that Gregg’s election really creates an opening,” he said. “I do think there already was an opening, and I think that’s reflected by the success that Steve Levin and Stephanie Gallagher had when they started their firm a couple of years ago.”

Both Himeles and Gerard Martin, a name partner with **Rosenberg | Martin | Greenberg LLP** in Baltimore, said that what will separate Levin and Curlett from the rest is skill.

“They’re both very good lawyers,” Martin said. “That’s really more important than whether there’s room in the market.”

An idea takes root

Curlett and Levin met in 2009, when each was assigned by the **U.S. District Court** in Baltimore to rep-



MAXIMILIAN FRANZ

Charles N. ‘Chad’ Curlett Jr., left, has joined Steven Levin in a new firm, **Levin & Curlett LLC**. They met in 2009 when each was assigned by the **U.S. District Court** in Baltimore to represent co-defendants in a case.

resent co-defendants in a case. They reviewed the police paperwork and found significant issues with the police narrative of events in the case.

Their strategy for the trial was to suppress that evidence.

“We snatched defeat from the jaws of victory when the court denied our motion, but the government saw the light and dismissed my client and offered a very favorable plea to Steve’s,” Curlett said.

The two said they enjoyed working together so much that the idea to work together in a firm someday took root.

When Gallagher left the firm in April, a natural opening was created for Curlett to leave **Saul Ewing**, despite the comforts and financial stability of being a partner at a big Mid-Atlantic law firm.

“For me, I think a smaller practice offers opportunities to represent individuals over corporate entities more often, increasing the likelihood that you’re going to end up in trial on your cases ...,” Curlett said.

The smaller firm’s cost structure, which allows for flexibility in offering fixed fees, will allow the two to take on more court-appointed cases, which can be more difficult to do often in a larger firm.

“In the sort of 13-year arc of my career, I’m really happiest when I’m handling criminal cases and in particular when I’m in court and in trial,” Curlett said.

Making the numbers work

As for the financials, Curlett said he brought 10 criminal cases with him, some civil matters and a potential *qui tam* lawsuit from **Saul Ewing**, and it will just be a matter of the cash flow catching up with the hours he bills.

He said he has worked out the hours he will bill each year, the overhead costs and his rate per hour to develop a model where the income is comparable to his old salary at **Saul Ewing**.

Curlett declined to provide *The Daily Record* with the firm’s hourly rates.

“In some matters, their lower rates will certainly be

an advantage,” Himeles said of **Levin & Curlett**. “Sophisticated clients, even in very important, high-stakes litigation, are aware of the cost and sensitive to the cost of litigation.”

Another cash-flow generator could be cases assigned by the federal court. Levin and Curlett said the **U.S. Attorney’s Office** has been busy, placing an emphasis on violent crime and the drug trade in Baltimore.

In October, **U.S. Attorney Rod Rosenstein** announced a **RICO** indictment with 35 defendants, and the government can only represent one of the defendants. Curlett said a buildup of cases like that will mean more work for his firm.

According to the **U.S. District Court** for Maryland, the hourly rate for Criminal Justice Act panel cases is \$125.

As those cases continue to roll in, they are straining the resources of the criminal justice panel attorneys who are often assigned those cases, Curlett said, which means there is no shortage of work there.

Levin said most of his work is retained, rather than court-appointed. He expects his firm will get some work from referrals from big firms in town who may represent a corporation but can’t represent officers or members of the board in criminal matters.

“[Levin and Curlett will] be banging on everybody’s door and letting them know they’re around and going to every meeting they can go to,” Martin said. “People will send them work. They do federal appointed work — that’s a great way to keep yourself in the mix.”

Curlett and Levin also have one thing that clients are often looking for in their attorneys — experience as prosecutors.

“They want to look for someone who not just knows what he’s doing, but knows what his opposing counsel is doing,” Levin said. “We know how the government is going to put together a case. We know how they’re going to try a case. We know the arguments they’re going to make and we have the benefit of knowing what the weaknesses are.”