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William Lamb (right) talks with Joel Frank, a managing partner at Lamb McErlane PC, in West Chester, which got its start with municipal contracts.

Law firm follows founder's path

William Lamb pursued his vision in Chester County, success on own scale.

By Chris Mondics

INQUIRER STAFF WRITER

Little more than a year after graduating from law school, William Lamb was getting restless.

He was chafing at life as a young associate at the then-old-line Philadelphia law firm Dechert L.L.P., where newly minted lawyers would slave away for years at menial tasks before having any chance of making partner. He yearned to

practice law in the quiet country towns of rural Chester County, where he had been raised.

So he marched into the office of the firm's chairman and said he wanted out.

"He [the chairman] said, 'I am disappointed in you; you could be sitting where I am in 30 years,'" Lamb recalled. "I said, 'You know, that is the problem. I really don't want to wait the 30 years.'"

He didn't have to wait long.

At a time when many law firms are striving to evolve as global enterprises, with thousands of employees and hundreds of millions in annual revenue, the locally focused practice that Lamb built after leaving Dechert shows how lawyers can thrive on a smaller stage, employing a potent combination of legal firepower and political net-

See **LAMB** on D8

Law firm follows his winning path

LAMB from D1 working.

After Dechert, Lamb hustled out to Chester County, working days as an assistant district attorney in the county seat of West Chester — his annual salary was \$4,500 — and nights for a small firm as a municipal attorney representing towns and other public agencies.

The firm — and career — blossomed.

Since his arrival in Chester County in the late 1960s, the Lamb McErlane P.C. law firm has grown tenfold to 29 lawyers. Today, Lamb is wealthy and influential. One of his high-profile prosecutions became the focus of a Hollywood film starring Sean Penn and Christopher Walken, with theme music by Madonna.

And the firm, despite its diminutive size, ranks as a litigation and appellate powerhouse in Pennsylvania.

But not just because of the polish and tenacity of its lawyers.

Over the years, Lamb, a Republican, built on his role as a popular local prosecutor and his network of political and business contacts to bolster both the firm and a lucrative private-banking business that netted him more than \$12 million when it was sold in 1999.

He got his first assistant district attorney job on the recommendation of the then-Chester County Republican chairman, Ted Rubino. The firm represents more than a dozen municipalities and other public agencies in Republican-controlled Chester County.

After Tom Ridge was re-elected governor in 1998, he and Lamb were on the golf course when Ridge casually asked "Lamb, what do you want?"

"I said something like, 'Put me on the Supreme Court,'" Lamb recalled.

And that is what Ridge did. Lamb is friendly with David Girard-diCarlo, the former chairman of the 500-lawyer Blank Rome L.L.P. law firm of Center City. Girard-diCarlo is a major Republican fund-raiser who stepped down from the firm to take over in 2007 as U.S. ambassador to Austria. Blank Rome regularly refers cases to Lamb McErlane.

Lamb's appointment to a one-year unexpired term on the state Supreme Court in 2003 further fueled the firm's growth. When Lamb, a key fund-raiser for Ridge, returned to the firm, its appellate practice only intensified. He is now an investor in the SugarHouse casino project, along with high-profile Philadelphia lawyer Richard



Sprague and Chicago real estate and casino mogul Neil G.

Bluhm. "Don't think that my service on the court has not helped," said Lamb, a strapping 6-footer who at 67 still tries cases and makes oral arguments before the Supreme Court. "It would be disingenuous for me to say that my experience on the Supreme Court has not helped me handle cases before them and attract business."

Lamb maintains politics can open doors and establish credibility with elected officials and other decision-makers, but this edge is not decisive.

Lawyers must prove their worth or they are soon shown the door, he said.

"I make my living practicing law; not practicing politics," he said.

To be sure, the \$12 million in fees that Lamb McErlane projects it will take in this year wouldn't move the needle at Center City behemoths like Dechert or Morgan, Lewis & Bockius L.L.P., both sprawling global enterprises that generate hundreds of mil-

lions in fees annually.

Yet Lamb McErlane pro-

vides a nice living for its lawyers. Salaries for the top partners exceed \$600,000; for junior to midlevel partners, they range from about \$150,000 to slightly more than \$300,000; for partners who generate substantial business, compensation is competitive with larger firms in Center City.

Junior associates are paid far less and lag well behind their peers in Philadelphia. At Lamb McErlane, third-year associates earn little more than \$90,000, while lawyers in big firms downtown typically earn \$160,000, or nearly 80 percent more.

But the pay gap for lawyers at Lamb McErlane diminishes as recruits generate their own lists of clients, or as in the case of managing partner Joel Frank, arrive with hefty client lists of their own.

Frank joined the firm in the mid-1990s from the Center City firm of Dilworth & Paxson L.L.P. He is one of the firm's biggest fee generators, after Lamb himself, and for a time was defense counsel to



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At Lamb McErlane, (front row, from left) James McErlane, William Lamb, (back row from left) John Cunningham, partner, Joel Frank, managing partner, Mary-ellen Allen, senior associate, and Vincent Donohue, partner. The firm has grown about tenfold since the late 1960s to 29 lawyers.

Ruth Arnao, the longtime ally of State Sen. Vincent J. Fumo, who was indicted along with Fumo by a federal grand jury on corruption charges.

In all, Lamb McErlane represents about 18 municipal agencies, authorities and school boards; its municipal-finance group, at the same time, has served as bond counsel on hundreds of millions in borrowing by local government entities.

But the bulk of the firm's work consists of commercial litigation, transactions, and its appeals practice.

Its commercial clients include Wal-Mart Stores Inc., in

an appeal of a \$160 million verdict against the company for denying workers rest breaks, and H&R Block Inc., in a case in which customers accused the company of concealing fees in connection with an early tax-refund program.

It is also deeply enmeshed in local real estate transactions.

One recent afternoon, partner Vincent Donohue, an accountant as well as a lawyer, sat behind a desk piled high with documents relating to an \$8 million transaction in which Donohue's client was

arranging financing for construction of a 60,000-square-foot office building to be occupied by a local pharmaceutical company.

"We follow the Bill Lamb model, which is get your backside out there and make sure everyone knows what you do," Donohue said. "I am a shameless networker."

When a local criminal gang went on a stunningly savage killing spree in the summer of 1978, leaving five young people dead, Chester County's image as a sleepy, rural, idyllic haven was briefly shattered.

The Johnston brothers —

Bruce Sr., David and Norman — migrants from back country Tennessee, had for years been on the radar screen of local authorities, who suspected them of stealing more than a \$1 million in farm equipment in southern Chester County and nearby Maryland.

As state and federal investigators closed in, the Johnstons feared a group of teenagers they'd recruited to help in the heists had been talking to authorities.

And in fact, one of them had — Bruce Jr., the teenage son of the gang leader, who

decided to cooperate after he learned his girlfriend had been raped by his father.

One by one, the Johnston brothers and an accomplice lured the victims to a remote hillside, where they shot them and tossed the bodies into a pre-dug grave. One was a stepson (and not Bruce Jr.) of Bruce Sr.

Bruce Jr. was the only one to survive the slaughter.

He was ambushed as he returned home with his girlfriend from a trip to Hershey Park, and although he was hit eight times, he survived. His girlfriend did not.

Although Lamb had already left the prosecutor job by the time the Johnston brothers were brought to trial, he was brought back as special counsel to prosecute the case.

The case drew huge national exposure, and it is entirely likely that Lamb could have gotten more.

Before it was over, each of the Johnston brothers had been convicted of murder and sentenced to life in prison. The case became the basis for the 1986 movie *At Close Range*, with Sean Penn in the role of Bruce Johnston Jr.

The filmmakers, seeking assistance from Lamb and his staff of county detectives, gave him a copy of the script. Sean Penn met with Lamb and his staff. But Lamb turned him down. Bruce Johnston Jr., long a willing participant in the gang's crimes, had been portrayed too sympathetically, according to Lamb.

In Lamb's mind, he was a

hardened criminal just like the rest, who for years had willingly participated in a vicious crime ring. He began to cooperate only to get back at his father, Lamb believed.

"It was one of those things, 'Don't let the facts get in the way,'" Lamb recalled. "We respectfully refused to give them any help. We read the script, and it painted Bruce Johnston Jr. as some sort of folk hero, and he wasn't. He was a bum."

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READING IS FUN

The school year is underway and when the Phanatic is not cheering on his favorite team, he is busy encouraging children to take part in his Be a Phanatic About Reading literacy program, presented by Veri-