

Going to the **DOGS**



Jim Karger with two of his dogs, Max and Bellini, in San Miguel de Allende, Mexico.

Lawyer Trades in Labor Practice for Consulting and Canines

by JONATHAN FOX

Six years ago this month, Jim Karger left the firm he founded. He'd known for some time that he needed to change his life. Work pressures had led to a ritual he found appalling: After leaving his office, he called his wife, Kelly, a few blocks from home and asked her to get his Wild Turkey and water ready so she could hand him the drink as soon as he walked through the door.

By worldly measures, Karger was a successful attorney — a partner in Dallas' Karger, Key, Barnes & Springer, billing \$300 an hour and earning \$500,000 a year. For about two decades, Karger says he had a thriving law practice and an undefeated record in heading off unionization drives at companies. His unorthodox approach to his work involved persuading companies to identify the mistakes that sparked employees' desires to unionize and then fix them.

"He's absolutely the best labor lawyer when it comes to [defeating union] organization campaigns," says James R. Voss, senior vice president of Solutia Inc., who is a former client of Karger's law practice as well as a current client of Karger's consulting practice.

LIFE
after
LAW

COURTESY PHOTO

Despite accolades from clients and colleagues, Karger, 55, says he was deeply unhappy because of stress, disillusionment over his own materialism, and disappointment toward some clients who did not heed his reform advice after he defeated union drives for them. "I didn't like fixing the same problems over and over again, being used up like a fireman," he says.

So Karger resigned his partnership. He and his wife sold their house in North Arlington, their matching twin-turbo Toyota Supras and nearly all of their possessions. They bought a 1984 Volkswagen van, packed it with their remaining belongings and left town for San Miguel De Allende, Mexico. "The camel got tired of carrying the load, knelt down and threw it off," Karger says.

A year later, the Kargers founded Save a Mexican Mutt (SAMM), a charity that rescues, rehabilitates and arranges the adoption of stray Mexican dogs. Karger also started a consulting practice with a slower pace than his old law practice, helping "relatively healthy" businesses worldwide improve relations with their employees.

"For the first time in my life," Karger now says, "I can honestly say I'm very satisfied with the way things are turning out."

"A Serious Vocational Error"

A native of Shreveport, La., and a graduate of Southern Methodist University School of Law, Karger began practicing labor law in 1976 with New Orleans' Kullman, Lang, Inman & Bee, now known as the Kullman Firm.

Karger believes his law school experience contributed to a shutdown of part of his personality that continued throughout his law career. "Law school teaches you to think with only one side of your brain," he says. "The emotional, creative, caring, compassionate side becomes flabby and weak."

At 10 a.m. of the first day Karger

reported to work in New Orleans, he had a nascent feeling that he had "made a serious vocational error," he says. "But I spent a long time getting that law degree, and I didn't want to quit." Karger says he realized during his first firm meeting that day that he would become a "corporate gladiator" doing the bidding of powerful corporations, and the concepts of "equality, fairness and justice would have very little to do" with his work.



At Kullman, however, Karger found a mentor in partner Andy Lang, who shaped Karger's philosophy toward labor law and workplace relations by urging him not to dislike

unions but rather to compete with them for the hearts and minds of workers. "He was a very hard worker, very intense, and he caught on very quick," says Lang, now retired as president and CEO of Lafayette, La.-based Petroleum Helicopters Inc.

In 1980, the now-defunct Hewitt Johnson Swanson & Barbie recruited Karger to join the firm, then one of Dallas' largest. In addition to practicing law, Karger co-owned a New Orleans' bodybuilding gym that he and a friend had bought from former Mr. Universe Boyer Coe. Karger accepted the Hewitt Johnson offer, sold his share of the gym and moved to Dallas.

In 1984, Karger formed a labor law boutique that went through several iterations, the last one being Karger, Key, Barnes & Springer in Dallas. Attorneys who practiced with Karger recall him as a gifted attorney and advocate with a knack for writing, analyzing a situation and client relations.

"His clients loved him," says John W. Bickel II, a commercial litigator and partner in Dallas-based Bickel & Brewer who briefly practiced law with Karger in the 1980s. "Jim is an excellent lawyer, period."

Bickel says that even in his earlier years of practice, Karger took an

unconventional approach to fighting unions. Rather than simply combating the union for a fee, Bickel says Karger would figure out what caused employees to consider a union and then seek to "revamp the thinking of the company."

Karger's approach was to fix employer-employee relations and make the union unnecessary, Bickel says.

Stephen C. Key, a Dallas labor attorney and principal in the Key Firm who partnered with Karger from 1994 to 2001, says Karger was "certainly not a typical attorney." He had long hair and would wear Harley-Davidson attire to work or a jogging suit, Key says.

Karger says he cultivated this image because he wanted to be seen as "just a guy" rather than a "straight-laced attorney."

Karger had a unique approach when holding workshops for corporate managers on employment law topics such as sexual harassment, Key says.

To illustrate why executives and managers should not tell off-color jokes, Key says, Karger would tell a dirty joke in a deadpan style and then watch the business leaders "sweat and stir." He did this, Key says, to demonstrate how locker-room jokes sound bad in a courtroom when repeated as evidence during a sexual harassment trial. "It was very effective," Key says.

Karger also developed a reputation as an outlandish personality in the button-down field of corporate law. Beginning in 1996, he sent theme calendars to his clients; one year his fellow attorneys and employees posed as a biker gang, another year as a paramilitary unit. The calendars were one of several Karger trademarks that *The Wall Street Journal* recounted in a 1997 profile of him.

Karger wrote a freewheeling and often outrageous column for the *Las Colinas Business News*, a small business newspaper, which echoed the rambling, hallucinatory style of his idol, gonzo journalist Hunter S. Thompson. His faxes to clients summarizing recent legal developments also had a wild, in-your-face tone.



Fritz Aldrine (above) says Jim Karger “is probably the most influential person in my life other than my parents.”

“Jim was clearly off the wall compared to other lawyers, which is what I liked about him,” says friend Michael L. Cohen, a Los Angeles solo who did litigation work for some of Karger’s clients. “Some people thought it was shtick, provocation,” Cohen says.

Today, Karger counts himself as one of those people. He calls his former reputation for attention-seeking behavior a “persona” that masked his underlying discontent with his life.

Karger says other attorneys speculated that his antics were a subconscious attempt to destroy his practice. Karger gives this theory some credence but says that if it was true, it backfired. The calendars, he says, “quadrupled, quintupled the practice. . . . People loved [the persona]; people ate it up.”

Born Free

Eventually, Karger says he could no longer hide behind his wild-and-crazy façade, and he began to suffer emotionally as stress and unhappiness mounted. The perpetual cycle of accumulating more and better luxury possessions, he says, “really didn’t deliver what I anticipated they would deliver.”

“It was hard to watch him, in essence, killing himself,” Kelly

says. “It was manifesting itself physically.” For example, Jim Karger says some days he could not get out of bed, because of neck pain his doctor told him was caused by stress. Stress also worsened the symptoms of Karger’s tinnitus, a constant ringing in the ears, he says.

He feared becoming like some older attorneys he knew. “I saw Maalox bottles on a lot of desks, a lot of people on third or fourth marriages,” he says.

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The situation came to a head when Jim asked Kelly if “all this,” meaning their possessions, was making her happy. “I really wanted her to say yes so I could keep going and be a martyr,” he says.

But Kelly, who met Jim when she worked as an officer manager for his brother’s dental practice, answered no to his question. Kelly, Jim’s second wife, says they were having the same thoughts. The couple has six children between them from previous marriages. “Fortunately, he said something to me first,” Kelly says. “What a relief.”

Jim Karger’s last day at the firm was Oct. 31, 2001.

When Karger left his partnership in Karger, Key, Barnes & Springer to move to Mexico, Key says he was surprised, because he did not see Karger as unhappy, although there were signs that the practice of law was wearing on him, such as Karger’s health problems.

Key says he was disappointed in a sense. “I did not feel slighted or

cheated, but Jim was a mentor to me as an attorney. I missed that kind of daily camaraderie.”

Key posits that Karger became overwhelmed, because he did not function as a disinterested advocate for his clients. Rather, Key says, Karger “rolled up his own happiness in results for his clients.” Key also says Karger lacked a spiritual grounding that could have helped him manage the stress of practicing law.

Today, Karger says he has found a spiritual life, even though he is not traditionally religious: “I have a deep sense of gratitude to something or someone other than myself.”

The Myth of More

After moving to San Miguel de Allende, the Kargers built a new life in Mexico. The small city, nestled in the mountains 180 miles northwest of Mexico City, is known for its 17th-century Spanish colonial architecture and large population of expatriates.

Although Karger entered Mexico on a tourist visa, he now has a residency visa for wealthy foreigners, which he renews yearly.

At first, Karger feared he had made a colossal mistake. After moving into a rental house, he recalls “waking up the next morning and staring at the ceiling, thinking, ‘What the hell have I done?’” Having nothing to do at the outset, Karger says, was a surprise after decades of working. He says he alternated between an overwhelming sense of freedom and relief and a fear that he had flushed a

25-year career away and lacked the skills with which to start over.

Also alarming was his lack of a backup plan if he failed to earn a living in Mexico. He had enough money to “last a few years but certainly not enough to last a lifetime,” he says. “I was working without a net. I say that with no pride in retrospect.”

Karger says that his first year living in Mexico was difficult, because of the lack of American-style amenities and culture shock. Karger spoke only a little Spanish when he first arrived in Mexico. He now has a workable knowledge of the language after taking intense lessons but says it is possible to get along in San Miguel de Allende without speaking Spanish because of the large expatriate population.

Now that he has settled in, Karger says he is grateful that living in Mexico helped end his belief in the “Myth of More” — that quantity of stuff equals quality of life. “It’s hard to be materialistic when I don’t have anything to buy,” he says. “There’s no Best Buy, Whole Foods or fancy restaurants. I might as well have been an alcoholic going cold turkey.”

Karger says he had an epiphany one day when he and Kelly thought they had found an empty lot on which to build a house. Kelly noticed a small shack to the side of the lot. Nearby, some children laughed and played without store-bought toys. Their happiness in spite of scarcity moved him. “I cried, because what I saw was the opposite of everything I had been taught,” Karger says.

Despite his pared-down lifestyle, Karger says he still felt something was missing in his life after living for a year in Mexico.

“It became obvious that the homeless animal problem [in San Miguel de Allende] was just staggering,” Karger says. Packs of homeless dogs were everywhere, he says, and he observed many starving, abused or run-over animals. He also learned that the local ani-

mal control department lacked funds for humane euthanization of stray animals.

After caring for an abandoned litter of puppies, Kelly “developed the passion” and the couple began to take stray dogs into their home. The Kargers developed a system where they would rescue animals, spay or neuter them, vaccinate them and socialize them with their growing pack of family dogs, which currently totals eight.

Karger called his friends and former clients in the United States and pleaded with them to adopt the rehabilitated animals — and it worked. The Kargers kept the project going, placing dogs with friends and with adoption organizations in areas with successful spay/neuter programs and scarcities of some dog breeds. U.S. authorities allow Mexican animals with health certifications and vaccination records into the country after a brief inspection at

the border, Karger says.

Since 2002, Karger says he and his wife have found U.S. homes for more than 200 Mexican dogs, while placing at least 100 with families in Mexico. The SAMM Web site recently featured 13 dogs available for adoption of varying sizes and breeds.

SAMM also obtained status as a 501(c)(3) nonprofit under U.S. tax laws. The nonprofit designation will help SAMM obtain donations, which Karger says are needed, because he and Kelly fund the project out of their own pockets at a cost of about \$2,500 a month. SAMM has grown to the point that self-funding is difficult, he says.

Karger is excited that the Diamond Aviators Association, a group of small-plane hobbyist and business aviators, has committed to helping SAMM transport dogs across the United States. Assistance from the aviator group would provide “a blessing in helping us solve one of our biggest challenges,” Karger says.

Currently, Karger and his wife drive the dogs as far as Texas or New Mexico

for adoption. A volunteer sometimes meets the Kargers in New Mexico and drives some dogs on to Colorado, Karger says.

The dogs have turned Karger into a big softie, his wife says: “Sometimes he’ll cry when they leave.”

Back to Work

Even though Karger found happiness helping the street dogs of San Miguel de Allende, he struggled to feel productive, Kelly says. “It’s something his parents ingrained in him. You have to work, work, work.”

After taking a break for about a year, in 2002 Karger turned his knowledge of the workplace into a successful consulting practice. “I needed purpose,” he says, “something to do to financially support myself and feel like I had professional value without having to go back to practicing law. It all came together.”

Karger and his wife, he says, spend about \$2,500 a month to live in San Miguel de Allende. Other cities in Mexico are less expensive, but less English is spoken there, he says.

Initially, Karger put out feelers to his old clients to see if they were “interested in creating workplace environments where people really want to come to work.”

He spends about half of his time consulting with U.S. and international employers on initiatives to improve employee morale and “change the grim reality that American employees are getting less and less happy.” He spends little time practicing law in the United States, other than occasional matters for longtime clients. Karger pays his Texas bar dues and keeps his continuing legal education credits current by taking online courses, he says.

One major theme of Karger’s consulting work and his 2004 book, “Why Work Isn’t Working Anymore: Tools to Transform Your Workplace As If People Mattered,” is that employee



earnings are not an accurate predictor of employee happiness.

When companies seek to spur productivity by promising more money or better benefits to employees beyond competitive wages in a particular industry, Karger says, they are not being honest, because average wages have stagnated over the past several decades on an inflation-adjusted basis while benefits have shrunk. What's more, they are pandering to the so-called "Myth of More." "It's all a terrible trick," he says.

Instead, Karger wants employers to improve relations with their employees through a relationship-based model. In other words, he says, companies should treat employees as "human beings, not units of labor" by prodding managers to adopt a more empathetic approach, because relationships are "the progenitors of workplace satisfaction and happiness," according to his book.



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To make such changes, Karger recommends that managers adopt several tools, including: milestone boxes, which are indexes that managers use to record significant events in the lives of their employees, such as hire dates, birthdays, birth of a child and

other anniversaries, for later follow-up in conversations with employees; managers' journals, diaries written by supervisors to document their efforts and goals to enhance their relationships with employees; and care cards, handwritten notes to employees to recognize significant events in their lives, from the death of a family member to accomplishments of family members.

Karger says managers who use the tools forge stronger bonds with their employees, and as a result employees feel valued by their managers and companies. Some managers are going through the motions when they begin using the tools, Karger says, but "the magic is that the feeling comes after the behavior."

Some attorneys and business leaders say Karger's teachings have transformed the way they see the workplace. His workplace tools "may sound soft and fluffy, but they are the foundation of successful management," says Solutia's Voss. "You have to know your employees and what makes them tick so they will perform highly."

Karger recalls skeptical managers who sent care cards and were shocked by the positive response from employees. One manager told him: "I had no idea how important I was in this person's life. You would have thought I gave them a box of gold."

Fritz Aldrine, who co-authored "Why Work Isn't Working Anymore" with Karger, says had he not met Karger, his approach to handling labor matters would have been empty, because he "definitely would not have left the workplace better off." Karger "is probably the most influential person in my life other than my parents," says Aldrine, associate general counsel for Austin's Temple Inland Inc.

Karger says he earns as much money consulting as he used to practicing law, but he doesn't dwell on it. He and Kelly live in an 800-square-foot "casita" they had built. Karger says he keeps

the casita's door open all the time so his eight dogs can run in and out. He travels occasionally on business to the United States and other countries, but he would like to plan retreats in Mexico for his corporate clients so he can cut back on traveling.


Karger lives simply in Mexico, and he says he puts the extra money earned in his consulting practice toward SAMM, other animal charities and his retirement.

While some of Karger's friends scratch their heads at his move to Mexico and others applaud it, all of them cheer his care for the canines of San Miguel de Allende and his labors in trying to make workplaces better.

"Jim is making some healthy contributions to society to try to guide employers to have constructive relationships with employees," Lang says.

Karger's advice for those contemplating the practice of law? "If you go into law, go into it for the right reasons." There should be "something you want to accomplish, rather than just make money." Passion for public interest law and government work are two examples, he says.

Karger also says new associates should not base their decisions to work for certain firms on their prestige. Instead, associates should find supervisors with whom they can be happy working.

Notes Karger: "Find somebody who reaches out to you . . . who cares about you as a person." 

Jonathan Fox's e-mail address is jfox@alm.com. "Life After Law," a series of profiles of attorneys who have left the practice of law to pursue a passion or simply to try something new, appears periodically in Texas Lawyer.