

# Business

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Naples | **Laird Lile**

## Attorney puts 'trust' back in family trusts

When Laird Lile was in third grade, he often spent nights with his father at an Ohio law library, retrieving law books from the stacks.

Having started his career as a schoolteacher, his father had decided in his 30s to pursue a career as an attorney to give his wife and three children a better life. And because his dad was commuting three hours a day to make that dream happen, young Laird was eager to help him.

For Lile, his father's determination and perseverance became his own career template. By the time he was in his midteens, Lile had decided that he, too, wanted to be an attorney — and even knew that he wanted to specialize in trusts and estates.

"I guess it was in my DNA," said Lile, 56, an attorney who not only has established a decades-old Naples law practice but also serves on a number of elected and appointed state judicial boards and commissions.

One is the Florida Courts Technology Commission, which among other issues is working to make state-mandated electronic legal filings efficient, simple to access and secure. That's no easy feat, given that just a few years ago, all legal filings involved mountains of paper.

But dealing with technical issues is no stretch for Lile, who taught himself simple computer coding when he was a teenager and then minored in computer science as an undergraduate business major at the College of William and Mary.

In the '80s, as a law student at Ohio Northern University and later at the University of Mi-



Naples attorney Laird Lile, who specializes in trusts and estates, in his law office Feb. 29.

ami, he found that his facility with computers, then a nascent technology, gave him a big advantage in his studies.

"No one had a PC then," he recalled, adding that his computer skills helped him do sophisticated calculations quickly when others were still doing them by hand, often inaccurately.

Being a computer whiz also helped him advance as a young attorney with a large Miami law firm, where he worked on some high-profile cases, like the estate of playwright Tennessee Williams.

But Lile soon tired of the big-city life in Miami and decided to move to Naples, a place more like his small Ohio hometown.



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Watch a video interview with Laird Lile.

"In the early '90s, Naples was very much a Midwestern haven," he said. "It was a place where I could get to know people."

As a solo practitioner in Naples, Lile soon discovered he needed to know much more

than the laws concerning wills, trusts, estates and probate. He needed to be something of a psychologist, too.

"The way to avoid problems after you die is to be open and honest with your family members while you are still alive," he said. "But people won't do it."

Instead, he said, tensions arise because parents often tell their children fibs to keep the family peace. For instance, they may say each of their children can have the same treasured heirloom — but the children don't realize they've all been told the same story until after the parents die.

Passions can run so high that Lile sometimes has to be creative to resolve disputes.

One time, for instance, he had an old family portrait copied to calm two squabbling heirs. Neither heir could tell which was the original and which the reproduction. So both were satisfied when the paintings were divvied up.

"Every family has some level of dysfunction and secrets," he said. "And emotions are often out of proportion to the value of the thing under dispute, like a class ring someone's father always wore."

A divorced father of two, Lile understands the importance of planning for any family contingency.

But as the Internet has turned many people into legal do-it-yourselfers who download forms for wills and other documents, he said heirs often face more problems than ever before.

With do-it-yourself wills, "there's always something messed up," he said. For example, some parents don't name a guardian for their children should they both die.

While he's still focused on his local practice, Lile's professional interests are far broader. He has served on dozens of state boards and committees dealing with legal matters and is a fellow in the American College of Trust & Estate Counsel (where he also is on the board of regents); an elected member of the Board of Governors for the Florida Bar; and the chairman of the Second District Court of Appeal Nominating Commission.

He's also been included in the peer-reviewed directory The Best Lawyers in America

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for 21 years in a row. Nine years ago the Collier County Bar Association named him Attorney of the Year.

Besides his numerous professional commitments, Lile has a long-standing interest in education. A founding board member and past chairman of the Collier County Education Foundation, he serves as president of the school advisory council for Naples High School.

Lile wants to further the education of newly minted attorneys, too. So he recently set up a residency program in his office modeled after a medical residency.

Although the pay isn't terrific — it's what an assistant public defender might make — Lile pays for his two assistants to go to conferences, delve into cases and otherwise immerse themselves in real-life legal work. But

they don't have to worry about racking up billable hours, as most young law associates do.

"There aren't enough jobs right now for young attorneys," Lile said. "This fills a gap."

Lile also recently took on a younger partner, M. Travis Hayes, and changed the name of the firm to Lile & Hayes PLLC.

Hayes, 37, is also heavily involved in state legal committees, and he was named one of the Top 40 Under 40 Trusts and Estates Attorneys in Florida by the American Society of Legal Advocates.

Although he at first hesitated about giving up some control in his practice, Lile said he knew it was time. He had seen firsthand the havoc that could happen in businesses where there was no clear succession plan for its active and involved — but ultimately mortal — middle-aged owners.

"I didn't want to be the shoemaker whose children had no shoes," he said.