



# Jonathan Schopf

## The Animal Attorney

### COVER STORY

By Jenna Caputo

Photos by MarkBolles.com

As young adults, we usually have an idea in our heads about how we think our lives will be. But often, one event – sometimes something that seems small and inconsequential – can change our whole course. When Jonathan Schopf left his hometown of Cambridge Springs in western Pennsylvania to attend Albany Law School here in the Capital District, he never thought he would someday be known as “The Animal Attorney.”

He earned his BA in Criminal Justice, went to law school, where he met his wife, Carin, opened a landscaping company while studying for the bar, then finally got his first job as an attorney. Admitted to practice in New York, Pennsylvania, U.S. District Court, U.S. Second Circuit Court of Appeals and the Supreme Court of the U.S., Jonathan now has his own practice here in Clifton Park. It was in 2006 when his wife (also an attorney) first mentioned a new area of law that was starting to get exposure – animal

law. Shortly after, Jonathan was waiting in town court for his case to be called when the judge asked him if he could represent defendants on a fairly serious dangerous dog proceeding. It was an emotional case as there was a real possibility the dog would be euthanized and the defendants did not have an attorney.

He had only a few minutes to read the statute before he tried his first case in the Agriculture and Markets Law sector, but he was able to save the dog from being put down. The witness for

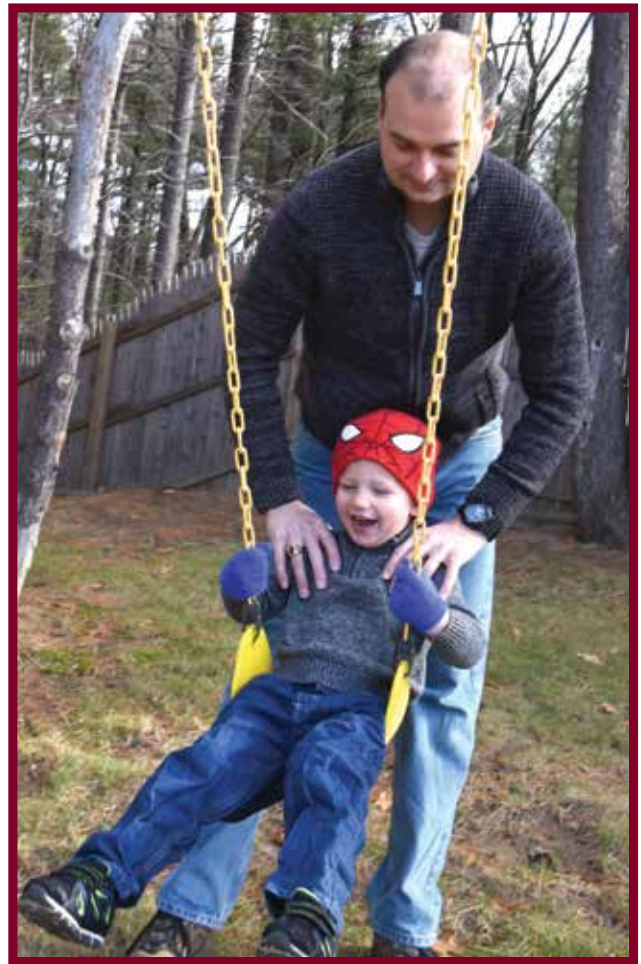
the case, a private dog trainer, was impressed and started referring him other cases. "It took me about five years to develop the 'street cred' with the local animal people, but now I'm pretty much the animal attorney for upstate NY. I get calls from all over the country and have represented clients from at least a half dozen states on all sorts of issues related to animals and pets." His record is impressive. While having tried hundreds of dangerous dog cases in local courts, he's only had one client's dog ordered to be euthanized. "Being there with the mom while she had to explain to a seven year old why his dog wasn't coming home was one of the hardest things I've had to watch," he says.

Jonathan's love for animals has also extended to non-profit work with Out of the Pits, based here in the Capital Region. As a board member and General Counsel, Jonathan assists in legal aspects of the group's mission to educate the public about the true nature of the American pit bull, while also assisting law enforcement in mass-cruelty seizure and taking abused dogs from fighting and drug rings. They have become one of the best dog rescues in the state and were even involved in the rehabilitation of two of the dogs from the Michael Vick fighting ring that garnered national attention in 2007.

Focusing on education, the group visits schools throughout the Capital District as well as in Massachusetts

and Connecticut. Since their inception, they have successfully rehomed over 6,000 dogs and helped many others to stay in their homes. But for every home they find, they receive hundreds of other calls asking them to rescue a pit bull. Thousands of displaced dogs are filling the streets and shelters, and until there are a sufficient number of loving homes, they have launched the "Fix-A-Bull" program, offering a low cost pit bull spay-neuter option in an attempt to address this overpopulation problem. Unfortunately, with about 1,000 requests a week coming in to take unwanted pit bulls, and with shelter statistics that are equally staggering, typically only 1 in 800 pit bulls find a loving home and over 80% are euthanized in shelters.

In addition to his work with Out of the Pits, Jonathan is involved in forming a Law Enforcement SPCA here in Saratoga County. They already have court approval and now are working on all the regulatory issues to get it running. While Animal Law and its derivatives comprises about



40% of his practice, Jonathan stays busy in town as the attorney for the Sportsmen's Club of Clifton Park and many local businesses. He also handles various other types of cases, including religious corporation work, general litigation and small business issues like debt collection, corporate, contracts, start ups, commercial and civil litigation, municipal, property tax challenges, guardianship proceedings, pistol permit revocation hearings, transactional real estate and minor estate planning.

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He is also now the County Supervisor for Clifton Park. "I am not a politician, but I have always been casually interested in politics," he states. "I had an opportunity that came out of the blue last year to get involved in local politics and to run for town judge. I wasn't successful, but I counted it as a personal victory. Running against a 37-year incumbent was a real challenge. We ran a fun and different campaign and I learned a lot in a process that has a steep learning curve. The County Supervisor position unexpectedly opened up this spring and I thought that with my municipal law background that I was a good fit. It's a legislative position, so that is different for me, but I figured that I could either stand around and complain about things, or actually participate in our government and try to make a difference."

Jonathan isn't only active at work. With Carin and their two sons, they are often out around town, participating in programs at the library or the Commons, as well as other community events. His oldest son plays baseball, basketball and is a Cub Scout, while his youngest son is trying out hockey and loves helping his dad fix things around the house. They have lived in Clifton Park for 11 years and enjoy the variety of outdoor activities available here and in the Adirondacks.

Jonathan also has a natural mechanical ability and likes to tinker with fix-it projects. His largest attempt was a restoration project on his aunt

and uncle's 1929 39' wooden motor yacht. The boat ended up being in worse shape than expected and the monetary commitment would have been too great, so he had to abandon that project. But his dad salvaged the teak and mahogany off of it and made a desk for him that he uses today, while Jonathan used the propeller to make a desk lamp. His current project is taking care of renovations in his new office space.

Jonathan is passionate about his work and strives to make a difference in his community. He would like to change how lawyers are perceived and prove that they are not bad people looking to manipulate their clients. "At the end of the day, I'm just there to do my job, which is to represent my clients as best as possible," he says.

He warns everyone to think ahead to help keep their pets safe. "Seriously, use a leash, fence your yard, watch your dog. Don't let small children around your dog no matter how nice of a dog it is. The actions of animals and how they react to stimuli on any particular day is impossible to predict. So many people I've represented could have avoided a bad situation with a little common sense."

He also encourages everyone to be involved in community life. The only way to create change is to take action. He advises to, "Be involved, pay attention to government at all levels. This is your town, your state and



your life. I run into so many who are completely checked out of politics and the multitude of laws and regulations that are passed every year. You have to pay attention and take action to make changes to things you don't agree with or to promote action that you want to take. Most importantly, vote!" ■

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