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All III tilt family

All the lawyers at SoBe's Crockett & Chasen are gay or lesbian, so perhaps it was inevitable, if not exactly planned, that the firm would come to specialize in issues of relevance to the gay community

AT CROCKETT & CRAVEN: From left, lawyers Steven Robert Kozlowski, Paul Hampton Crockett, Elizabeth F. Schwartz and Jerry Simon Chasen with office administrator Rachel Figura. Review Staff

Richard Hammond's partner was dying from AIDS. In the midst of the anguish he felt, watching his lover wasting away, Hammond slowly realized something.

He needed a lawyer.

Gay and lesbian partners in Florida don't have the protection of legal marriage that allows a transfer of assets upon the death of a spouse. Hammond, 67, a Miami Shores resident who works as a technician at Mount Sinai Hospital in Miami Beach, realized he and his partner, Allyn Gibson, had no protection from anyone who wanted a claim on his Gibson's estate.

He found Paul Hampton Crockett, who runs a small firm on Lincoln Road in South

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Crockett

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Beach. Crockett set up an estate plan for Gibson.

"He fought for me. He stood up for me," Hammond says. "He handled [Gibson's] family for me."

Hammond had gone to Crockett for a reason.

"I'm gay. He's gay. I didn't have to hide anything," Hammond says. "I could say, 'This is my lover, we've lived together for 10 years.' It was like trusting my own."

Crockett's firm, four-lawyer Crockett & Chasen, is composed entirely of gay and lesbian lawyers. It wasn't designed as a marketing move to reach out to South Florida's substantial gay community. But it has worked out that way.

"We're not creating the need, we are just trying to address it," Crockett says. "We are dealing with issues where there is a lot of shame."

Much of what Crockett and his fellow lawyers do is an attempt to use existing law to protect the rights of their gay and lesbian clients in a legal environment that has offered little straightforward protection for them.

That means using devices like trusts and wills to protect the shared property of a gay marriage. Or suing under the federal Americans with Disabilities Act to ensure equal treatment in the work place for HIV-positive workers. Or creating "sperm donor agreements" for a lesbian couple that wants to have a baby, but wants to ensure the sperm donor has no parental rights.

"The laws are lagging behind the reality," Crockett says. "I have to help people fight back and use the laws that are out there." Crockett, 38, says his life hasn't followed "an ordinary pattern." Besides his legal work, he lectures on legal issues affecting the gay and lesbian community. He has written two books on the subject. He also paints and has a studio in Miami. His artwork decorates his unassuming Lincoln Road law office.

"He's very personable, very capable," says Richard Milstein, a partner with Akerman, Senterfitt & Eidson in Miami who served as a mentor to Crockett early in his legal career. "He's one of the delights of my life."

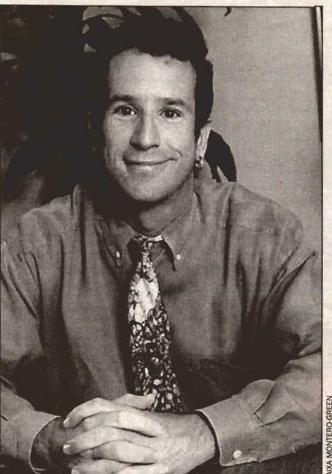
Crockett started his legal career at Milstein's small firm in Coral Gables and moved on with Milstein to Akerman in 1990. In the meantime, he began writing a legal advice column for a small South Florida gay magazine.

"I was stunned by the response," he says. "People were starving for this information."

In 1993, he formed his own firm with another lawyer from Akerman, Gary Franklin. Ten months later, Jerry Chasen, whose specialty is estate planning, joined the firm as a name partner. (Franklin left the firm — and the practice of law — in 1996. He moved shortly afterward to New York City.)

"It's exactly what I wanted," Chasen says. "This was the community I wanted to serve."

In 1996, Crockett spoke at a University of Miami law school class. Elizabeth Schwartz was in the audience. She asked Crockett to lunch and told him that he had



to hire her. "She told me, 'You need me," Crockett says.

"This firm purports to represent the gay community and it didn't have a woman," Schwartz says. Crockett hired her immediately, while she was still in school.

Schwartz does many of the same things Crockett does, making speeches, writing columns, but for lesbians.

"Even within the gay community, lesbians are underrepresented," Schwartz says. "The issues that lesbians face are unique. Our concerns about family and health issues go largely unaddressed."

The bulk of her practice lies in those issues, everything from sperm donor agreements to negotiating property, custody PEOPLE ARE 'STARVING FOR INFORMATION':

Paul Hampton Crockett explains the decision to market his law firm's services to the gay community: 'We're not creating the need, we are just trying to address it.'

and visitation rights when a couple with a child splits up.

Steven Kozlowski, a litigator, joined the firm as an associate six months ago. The co-chair of the Gay and Lesbian Lawyers Association in Miami-Dade County, he says Crockett's firm "is the kind of practice I dreamed about."

The association is sponsoring a reception Saturday at the Raleigh Hotel on South Beach to discuss legal issues for "the next generation" of gays and lesbians, he says.

Crockett will be honored at a luncheon May 7 by Mothers' Voices, a national activist group composed of mothers who have lost children to AIDS.

"The main reason is his work with AIDS discrimination," says Barbara Gaynor, who heads the organization's local chapter. "Whether it's with his clients or writing books or speaking, he has been out front about himself."

Crockett says he has had no choice. He's been HIV-positive since 1990 and lost his lover to AIDS in 1996. He pushes his fellow lawyers to be active in the community and to have a diverse life not dominated by work.

"I have had enough people die and clients that I love pass that I know I'm here for a reason," he says. "When people come to me and their hearts have been ripped from their bodies, I understand."