

7 People, 4 Lawyers, 3 Dogs and (Slightly Better) Wi-Fi: 14 Months and Counting at O'Melveny Chair Brad Butwin's Full House

After more than a year in the Butwin bubble, the law firm chair shares lessons learned, and the joys and pains of being around a lot of family all the time.

By Patrick Smith
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Just over a year ago, The American Lawyer ran a piece detailing the rather **unique situation** that O'Melveny & Myers chair Bradley Butwin found himself in at the beginning of the pandemic.

At that point, the Butwin fam was on day 63 of working from home together at the family house on Long Island. They are now well past 400 such days.

As vaccinations increase, businesses reopen and the world begins to emerge from a yearlong experiment in social distancing, the end appears near for the Butwin full house, although it isn't here quite yet.

The American Lawyer recently caught up with Butwin to see what has changed, and what hasn't, since the household started its great experiment in time and food management, beer pong competitions and Wi-Fi prioritization.

Last time we checked in on you, there were seven people, four lawyers and three dogs bouncing around the house. Who's left?

Here we are exactly a year later. I am with my entire family still in place. Been with Randi [his wife], my two sons, two daughters and my new daughter-in-law. And of course Brady, Bailey and Benji [the pups], who show an uncanny ability to jump, bark and get excited at the wrong time every time. It's now been 431 days [as of this interview], we are fully vaccinated and looking forward to getting out into the world.

With over 3 million dead, millions of lost jobs and people cut off from loved ones for more than a year, it's been a hard time. If that wasn't enough, during this period we had a racial justice movement, the most polarizing election in memory and the breach of our Capitol.

But we were among the lucky ones. I am grateful that I am able to do my job and be with my family.



Courtesy photo

At the remote law school graduation ceremony in the Butwins' backyard.

While it is really nice to be here, with family, it hasn't been all fun and games. Isolation has taken a toll. I've been in the same chair looking at the same screen for 431 days and counting. My pod is one law firm chair and two adult kids working at different major law firms—neither of whom has seen their offices yet—another daughter who transitioned to clerking for a federal judge, one wonderful daughter-in-law, my wife of 32 years and our youngest daughter who had to pick a college without seeing any of them in person. But we are all still here.

You mentioned during our previous conversation that it took a lot of coordination to run that house well. Were you able to keep it up? How did things evolve? Did it get all "Lord of the Flies" or anything?

There is no shortage of requests of the kids to help with this and that, and that wouldn't occur if they were living where they were living before. But that goes with the

territory. If you are a first-year associate about to polish off a memo for a partner, you don't want to be asked to go out and open up the umbrellas, for example. So, there is some edginess that occurs. And the nightly debate about what to order for dinner. As the pandemic has gone on, there has been more ordering and less cooking, and there are only so many different places we actually like. There is a little fatigue there. One of my sons and his wife have gone more vegan. When ordering from steakhouses, that becomes an issue.

Dog duty has also been an ongoing issue. Our pups lose their minds for each delivery, and we still have to coordinate who needs quiet and when for meetings. There is one new thing: The Peloton signup sheet.

Tell me about this Peloton signup sheet ...

We bought a treadmill and a bike. No one likes to wait for equipment in a gym, and definitely not in their home. But we have seven people. The early risers have no problem. The 7 a.m. to 8 a.m. hour causes a bit of a bottleneck. We have a schedule we try to agree on and we have incentives: If you cook dinner you have priority, though I tried to make chicken marsala one night and was relieved of my cooking duties moving forward.

If you clean up after dinner you may have priority for the Peloton. Supermarket visits are ahead of cleaning up after dinner, but behind cooking. If you help my high school senior with a tough assignment, that's up there. And pup duty helps.

All of this usually works, but there is another issue—my wife likes to take the taped exercises, and she usually defers to us in the mornings as her schedule isn't as tight. That means she is on it at the end of the day. The treadmill isn't that close to any room, but she thinks it is OK to scream at the instructor. The instructor can't hear her, but the people on my Zoom calls can. I got a question on whether things were "OK" the other day after an outburst.

It sounds like there have been some silver linings. But perhaps some more difficult challenges too?

Of course. We had one son and one daughter-in-law contract COVID-19. We had cancellations of the bar exam for my sons, had to do remote law school graduations, had a delayed family-only marriage ceremony held in our backyard and three ACT exam cancellations for our youngest. And we have three young lawyers trying their best to connect to others in a remote environment. These are first-world problems, but they are still problems.

This situation appears to be coming to an end soon, if things continue on their current path. Time for lessons learned.

When we spoke a year ago, I thought 'Wow, I'll get 60 family dinners.' On March 13, 2020, when I had the offices shut, I didn't think it would last very long. I did try to use this discussion as an opportunity to ask myself what I learned.

I learned about myself, family, the firm and the legal profession. I was reminded how much I enjoy being with my wife and kids. The time strengthened already deep connections with them. And I got really good at beer pong. I learned one of my kids is too competitive. I learned that both my family and my firm thrive on being together, and that in times of need they have each other's backs.

As a law firm leader it's been a treat to see the pandemic through the eyes of my kids during the early stages of their careers. What little things can mean to them: A simple compliment, the importance of communication. I really miss seeing our people in person. Over the past few weeks I have had several business meals and meetings in the city. They were invigorating.

Moving forward, I think I will travel a bit less when things are back to normal. I expect to do more meetings over Zoom and try not to do as many round-trip meetings to the West Coast in a day. Or travel abroad for just two or three days. There is an alternative to that now.

As horrible as things have been in the world, I am sure that there are parts of this that I will never have in my life again and will miss.

And the Wi-Fi?

Oh, we got that sorted out. I learned about extenders.

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Courtesy photo

At the family-only wedding outside the Butwin home.

O'Melveny