

Lawyer's Best Friend

How a poodle named Aristotle brings calm to Joel Feldman's family law office

Joel Feldman has a secret weapon at his Boca Raton law office. Be warned, though—it steals potato chips and is often spotted sneaking into rooms where confidential information is divulged. "But he does understand attorney-client privilege and would never breathe a word of *anything* he hears," Feldman assures. The "he" in question is Aristotle, his beloved standard, parti-colored poodle.

Before retiring to firm life, "Totle" was a therapy dog, and Feldman would take him to tour the nursing home where Feldman's mother lived. "He's always been very calm, right from the beginning," says Feldman, with Johnson, Ritchey & Feldman. "I started bringing him in to the office, and not only did everyone just love him, but he really helps set a better tone."

Particularly in the emotionally charged field of family law. "People don't often come here in the best of moods," Feldman says. "But as soon as Aristotle goes over to someone and puts his head in their lap or offers them a paw, there is something in the room that just changes."

Aristotle is a particularly good boy in dealing with the other side. "He sometimes helps keep the opposing lawyer more calm than he does the opposing party," Feldman says.

If Feldman notices a client getting off track in a mediation, Aristotle also gives him a reason to gracefully excuse himself and his client to remind them of the rules and procedures of depositions without explicitly saying, "*We should talk.*"



Feldman and Aristotle—aka Gene Kelly and Fred Astaire—dressed to the nines to visit a nursing home on Halloween.

Joel H. Feldman

Johnson, Ritchey & Feldman; Family Law; Boca Raton

"I will usually say, 'Aristotle is giving me the look. Why don't we take him outside?'" Feldman says, adding, "I think I just gave away a trade secret."

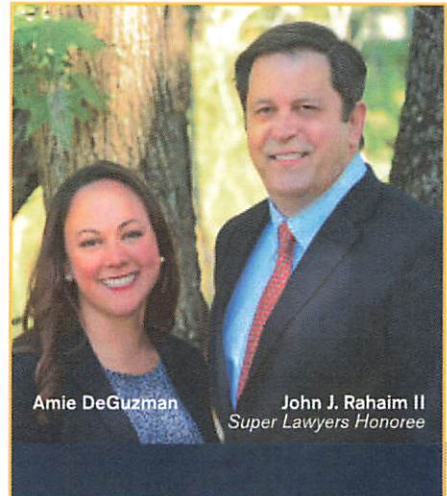
It's also helpful having a living, breathing reminder of a dog's love, he notes, if clients are bickering over animals: "Who gets the vet bills? Who pays for the food or medicine? Seeing the dog there, it often turns into less of a fight about the money."

Of course, not everyone is a dog person. Feldman recalls one attorney who objected to the poodle's presence during a deposition. "He kept coming up to her and putting his head in her lap," he says. "She kept getting distracted." She has since gotten two dogs of her own, he notes.

Aristotle may be the lone pup at the office, but not at home. Feldman and his wife, attorney Cheryl Wilke, have seven animals. But Totle just might be Feldman's favorite. Don't tell the others.

"This dog and I are entirely devoted to each other," he says. "Where I go, he follows."

He adds, "I had him on a Zoom just this week. We were working out a prenuptial agreement, and I noticed their dog in the background. I said, 'Oh, is that a papillon?' And just like that, the rapport is established. There aren't too many bad conversations to be had when there's a dog in common." —AMY WHITE



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