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Two years after founder's death, LegalShield growing with new audience

By: Molly M. Fleming The Journal Record January 18, 2017 0



Jeff Bell

ADA – LegalShield, previously known as Pre-Paid Legal, merged with New York-based Midocean Partners in 2011. Jeff Bell, who led Microsoft's Xbox team, succeeded Rip Mason, who served as CEO from 2011-2014. Company founder Harland Stonecipher led LegalShield for nearly 40 years.

Stepping into the shoes of an Ada champion and Oklahoma figure didn't faze Bell; he's an Oklahoma boy at heart.

"I was born in Oklahoma City," he said. "Both of my parents went to OU. I have family in Norman and western Oklahoma. I kind of get Oklahoma."

He said he had the chance to meet Stonecipher, who died in November 2014, and his wife, Shirley Stonecipher, and found it easy to talk to them about core values and how the company could continue to succeed in the state.

LegalShield has 700 employees in Ada. The company provides membership-based legal services. Members pay a monthly fee and can access attorneys in every state and four Canadian provinces. The membership count is more than 1.6 million. Bell said when he started it was about 1.4 million. Bell said he expects the company's membership to grow quickly because the time has come for that type of service; he compared it to Uber, Airbnb, and other peer-to-peer businesses. By 2020, he said he wants to reach 14 million members.

"This a product whose time has come," he said.

But LegalShield isn't the only company offering those services, and some businesses even offer the plans as part of their benefits packages. Hyatt Legal Plans has been in operation since 1977. The Ohio-based company owned by MetLife also offers a monthly fee for members, but it is through a payroll deduction. Marketing and Business Development Manager David Seed said via email that the company has heard of people being cautious regarding legal services.

Seed said Hyatt encourages its members to go visit the attorney. Common legal issues covered in the plan include will preparation, estate planning documents, or elder law issues.

"We've found that once people use our plan and see how easy it is and how much they can do, they share their positive feedback with others," Seed said via email.

Bell said besides growing the membership, he's working on developing more leaders within the company. He's also working with the American Bar Association and state bar associations to recruit more law firms. "Personal development is critical," he said. "The company is bigger than one person."

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