



Jeffrey Hughes, Owner, Legal Grind

[By Regan Morris]

Thirsty for justice? Jeffrey Hughes' two Legal Grind cafes in the Los Angeles area offer "Coffee and Counsel" to those who may not otherwise seek legal advice. Through his innovative venture, Hughes has worked hard to both provide a valuable service to his community and change the public perception of attorneys.

Jeffrey Hughes makes a mean cappuccino with a strong side of legal advice - on everything from divorces to immigration.

Actually he calls the coffee drink a "cop'accino" and also serves "L.A. Law'ttes" at Legal Grind, the innovative café he started in Santa Monica in 1996 to provide legal services to the community.

Hughes now owns two Legal Grinds in Los Angeles and is looking to franchise the concept, possibly across the country. He opened the second Legal Grind in Inglewood last year.

The 38-year-old lawyer and entrepreneur grew up working in the restaurant business and always dreamed of running his own café. He also dreamed of going to graduate school and, after graduating from UCLA in 1988 with a degree in mass communications and business, he decided to attend law school at Loyola in Los Angeles.

Hughes is passionate about disproving the stereotypes about lawyers being greedy and ruthless.

"I set out to make law more accessible to the middle class, at least in my neighborhood," he told LawCrossing. "And...to change the perceptions people have of lawyers."

Hughes targeted the middle class and working poor after a legal needs study from the American Bar Association said those groups were not given adequate access to the law.

The poor have Legal Aid and the wealthy have all the lawyers they want, he says.

Legal Grind was the 2001 recipient for the American Bar Association's Louis M. Brown Award for legal access.

"Lawyers at that time didn't have such a good name," he said. "I don't know if they do now. I wanted to be proud of my job and of what I was doing."

Hughes is a modern day Renaissance man. Aside from his cafés, he still litigates, is renovating a building and he has even dabbled in creative writing for television.

Hughes runs Legal Grind with his wife Annie. Their 9-month-old son is often seen in the back of the Santa Monica café.

Hughes "strongly encourages" anyone interested in opening a Legal Grind to contact him. But he admits that franchising the law could have pitfalls.

"Franchising the law is tricky," he said. "It's not like hamburgers or hotdogs. We have to be careful about quality control. People's perceptions of lawyers are subjective. Our success has been because of the strong community support, so a franchise would also have to get the community involved, with different legal experts from the community.

"If we franchise, I want to make sure they're successful," he says. "For one, I don't want to be sued and I don't want to screw up their lives.

"It's a matter of timing and we've spent eight years perfecting the concept," he says. "We're also expanding on the Internet, which is a bit easier."

He thinks the concept will have national appeal.

"With Legal Grind, people can identify with the brand," he said. "With the working poor and the middle class, that's how people feel about the legal system - it's a legal grind."

Hughes says he created his own niche out of passion, but also out of necessity.

"Coming out of law school in '92, there was a recession. There were very few jobs available. In 1989, about 80 percent of the class had jobs. When I graduated, only 20 percent of the class had jobs. And the big firms wanted attorneys with several years experience at firms.

"I considered the District Attorney's office and family support law, but even those jobs were scarce," he said.

"I knew there were many things I could do with a law degree," he said. "What I did, I created my own profession."

Over a dozen lawyers work out of Legal Grind on various days, generally between 3 and 6 p.m. For example, on the first and third Monday of every month, attorney Michael Goldstein offers a \$25 "Coffee and Counsel" session on employment rights, worker's compensation, wrongful termination, sexual harassment, personal injury and civil/business disputes between 5 and 6 p.m. Another lawyer simultaneously offers advice on landlord/tenant disputes, auto accidents, restraining orders and small claims.

During the day, before the various experts come in, people can use the document preparation service, pop in to get something



notarized or drink coffee while browsing the self-help books on the shelves, including "Your Divorce Advisor."

"When I opened in 1996, we did a brisk coffee business, until Starbucks opened a drive thru next door," Hughes says. "That was a blessing in disguise. When demand was diminished, it allowed us to focus more on the legal services and to start providing more."

Hughes also prides himself on Legal Grind's coffee.

"We don't want to serve bad espresso, because then people will think we'll screw up their divorce," he said.

Hughes offers advice to people during the day, but says his success relies on the experts who practice out of Legal Grind.

Legal Grind takes a percentage for the attorney referral service, but Hughes did not want to be specific about how much.

"I don't try to do medical malpractice or immigration," Hughes said. "That's

one of the reasons we have such a good reputation in the community, because we provide experts."

He says franchises would also need to rely on the community experts to be successful.

"I suppose if one lawyer were to run a Legal Grind, he or she might be able to make as much as people in a firm," he said. "But that's taxing on a person's personal life. And the lawyer would have to be expert in many areas."

"And not many lawyers have the patience to talk to 50 people for 15 minutes each," he said.

Hughes says lawyers who want to become entrepreneurs or start their own practices should read a lot of business books and "do something that merges your passions and your interests."

"To be an entrepreneur, well to be successful in business, you have to wear several hats," he says. "In the book, *The "E" Myth*, it says you have to be a manager, an

entrepreneur and a craftsman. Typically, most people don't wear all three hats."

He says he knows many lawyers that have tried and failed in business.

"In Dallas, a guy from a big firm has been successful with his restaurant - I consider it an infringement. It's called Legal Grounds. I've got a legal trademark with the federal government for Legal Grind."

When asked if he intended legal action, Hughes said: "Not right now. But that could change if we move into Dallas."

Hughes says his secret to happiness is only pursuing cases that interest him.

"I still do some construction defect litigation. My brother is a contractor and I'm renovating a building right now with an architect. It's interesting to me. It's fulfilling for me to practice," he said. "We have helped thousands of people that have come to Legal Grind for direction. I like the fact that I have created something that has made my community a better place."