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### **Duck, duck, decoy: Attorney is passionate - and accomplished - duck carver**



John Nemazi showing off one of his carved duck decoys in his Southfield office at Brooks Kushman. Photo by Paul Janczewski

**By Paul Janczewski**  
*Legal News*

If you see a tall, mustachioed man hovering over a road kill bird, don't assume he's just someone looking for another ingredient for redneck stew. It could be John E. Nemazi

taking precise measurements and pictures of the fallen fowl as research for his carving hobby.

Nemazi, 58, of Bloomfield Hills, is an attorney and engineer who heads the patent prosecution group at Brooks Kushman, a Southfield intellectual property and commercial law firm. He holds or shares more than five-dozen patents, and has made a nice living helping manufacturers get their products to market by designing around existing inventions.

He can dazzle with his words and speak eloquently and expertly on matters both legal and mechanical.

But what really gets Nemazi animated is talking about his hobby of carving duck decoys and calls.

“I’ve always been interested in decoys,” he said.

Working at General Motors, attending law school, and other things early in life kept him too busy. But after he got situated, Nemazi took classes in duck decoy making.

“It’s fun and relaxing.”

And he’s been whittling away ever since.

Nemazi was born in Detroit, but grew up in Livonia in a typical suburb. He shoveled snow, cut grass, and had a paper route for money, but decided to be an engineer, like his father. His interest in engineering also grew when he worked on motorcycles at a Honda dealership in high school.

“I liked things with engines,” he said.

The young mechanic bought and fixed up bikes that his boss deemed were beyond repair. After graduating from Livonia Franklin High School in 1970, he entered General Motors Institute in Flint, (now Kettering University) and graduated from the five-year program with a degree in mechanical engineering. The curriculum there required students to work and attend school, so Nemazi worked at the Pontiac engine plant.

But the auto industry was in bad shape then, and after graduation, he was laid-off. Nemazi then started taking classes in business administration and graduated from Wayne State University with a master’s degree. He later was rehired at GM, and was working at the tech center on basic engine design for about six years when he decided to attend law school.

“I liked law because it was kind of like the rules you play business by,” he said. “It seemed interesting, particularly the number of areas of law you can use an engineering degree in.”

After graduating from the Detroit College of Law, Nemazi joined a patent law firm in Mount Clemens and eventually was named a partner. That firm merged with Brooks Kushman in 1988, and after working there as an associate for two years, he became a partner in 1990.

At Brooks Kushman, Nemazi handles patent prosecution, prepares and files patent applications and has been instrumental in the firm's growth in that area by combining elements of law, marketing and design. The law firm's clients rely on Nemazi to assess the existing technology of a product and produce a "design-around" solution that takes into account other similar products yet steps on no legal toes while offering a new product with new functions, possibly at a lower cost. If someone threatens to sue, Nemazi and Brooks Kushman help clients defend their position.

Nemazi said the firm, based in Southfield with an office in Los Angeles, offers flexibility to him and others, and some attorneys in their 80s still work there.

"Our firm tends to do a lot of very big cases," he said, both national and international.

Teams of lawyers with specific specialties are put on cases, based on the expertise needed for a certain case. Nemazi said research prior to trial is a big part and includes discovery, damages, or formulating a defense.

"Because of my patent background, I get involved in cases with convoluted technical patent issues," he said. "You get to really dive in and spend a lot of time on projects."

He said a typical patent application is a "bite-sized project" that usually requires around 30 hours and gets set aside until issues arise.

"But when you work on a lawsuit, you can spend hundreds or thousands of hours working on one technology and really get immersed in it, which, to me, is a lot of fun."

Cases have grown not so much in complexity over the years but by leaps and bounds on the damages side.

"We collected \$2.7 million (on a case years ago) and we thought that was huge," he said. "But by today's standards, it was kind of a small case. There has to be over \$100 million in dispute to be on the 'big case' list now."

Nemazi, who is married with two daughters, said he's carved about 200 duck decoys over the years, and is a member of a local carving club. He has won nearly 10 Best of Show awards at local and national competitions, but his motto for carving remains "do it fast" and "do it the old school way."

He starts with a block of wood, often cedar, carves the body, then cuts it in half to hollow it out before gluing it back together. Nemazi will use basswood for the duck's head, attach it to the body, and place a keel on the bottom so it floats level and acts stable. He

uses only hand tools, chipping and whittling away until the shape looks like a duck. He dabs on the paint with a brush and sponge, and the decoy is ready to go.

“In competitions, the birds are put in the water upside down and have to self-right,” he said. “You make them float good.”

He also hunts ducks, but said if he shoots one, he’s usually done. “My wife and daughters don’t like to eat duck,” Nemazi said. If he could hunt ducks like he fishes — catch and release — “I’d let them all go.”

“But it’s more rewarding to have ducks come into decoys that you’ve made than a bunch of plastic decoys you bought from a store,” Nemazi said.

Many people get very elaborate in making duck decoys, with fancy texture, details down to the fluff of feathers carved and burned in. There are competitions for those lifelike birds too, but Nemazi said if it takes too much time it ceases to be relaxing and becomes more of a chore.

He said simple trumps intricate in the water anyway.

“The ducks can’t tell them apart.”

Often, tournaments require competitors to provide a rig — six birds of the same species — for judging. The winner is the one who’s decoys look the best and accurately portray the species, whether it be mallards or one of the other hundred-plus species of ducks.

“You try to tell a little story with your six birds,” Nemazi said. “You try to make them look like a happy group of birds.” To accomplish that, Nemazi will carve ducks looking left, looking right, craning their heads, sleeping, or doing whatever else ducks do.

His interest in ducks is visible in his office. On shelves, countertops and elsewhere, Nemazi has gathered several dozen decoys, some carved by him, some antiques from the 1950s and some lifelike looking decoys given to him by others.

While some carvers specialize in a certain species, Nemazi is going for the “Noah’s ark” route for his carvings. One male, one female, of as many species as he can, with about 80 percent completed. And with the Internet, Nemazi said research has been made easier to get as accurate a picture of certain ducks as possible.

But Nemazi will do almost anything to aid his research. While making decoys of endangered species birds, he saw one get hit by an automobile traveling in front of him, and stopped to examine the dead bird.

“I was judged down badly in a competition for making a bill too long, so I started measuring the bird’s bills to make sure it as representative of the species,” he said.

While some sell their creations, Nemazi said he gives his away.

“If I want to make money, I come to work,” he said.

To further his hobby, Nemazi began carving duck calls three years ago.

“It was an excuse to make things out of oddball woods,” he said. The key is to make the calls blow loud as well as blow soft. “It’s amazing how loud it can get,” he said. “My wife doesn’t like me to blow them in the house, and she used to have a rule that I don’t blow them after 10 p.m., then it was do not blow them while she was in the house. Now, I only blow them when she goes shopping.”

Nemazi said the fun comes by attracting ducks with a call he made. And although he tries to “make them look pretty, at the end of the day it’s gotta sound good too.”

For now, Nemazi plans to continue working, and carving, for as long as he can.

“I don’t envision retiring, because this is a fine place to work.”

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