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Sales experience is preferred

For Wiedner & McAuliffe leader, early job prepped him to pitch ideas to clients, judges and opponents

BY JOHN FLYNN ROONEY
Law Bulletin staff writer

After James W. Stevenson Jr. enrolled in night law school classes, he kept his day job selling pierogies, garbage bags and pet food.

Three decades later, he still uses that sales experience in his current role as managing partner of Wiedner & McAuliffe, where he concentrates on defending against workers' compensation claims.

"Everyone has to sell themselves," Stevenson said. "If you are trying a case, you have to sell your client's position and you have to sell yourself to a judge, jury or administrator — those who have the power to make a decision."

After receiving his undergraduate degree from DePauw University in Indiana, Stevenson went to work at a local company selling food products to warehouses and grocery store chains.

"My mantra has always been, 'Do what you say you are going to do when you say you are going to do it,'" he said.

Indeed, Stevenson has proven that he can sell ideas to people, including judges, opposing lawyers and clients, said Robert P. Nesbit, Stevenson's friend since college and a principal at Kovitz, Shifrin, Nesbit.

Wiedner & McAuliffe is a 57-lawyer firm with four offices. The most recent addition was a three-lawyer Kansas City, Mo., office that opened in April. The others are in Chicago, Rockford and St. Louis.

Stevenson brings passion and energy to his role as managing partner, said Paul W. Wiedner, a firm partner who Stevenson replaced as managing partner. Stevenson's first and most important contribution as managing partner was launching the Kansas City office, Wiedner said.

"He was handed that responsibility and, within a reasonably short period of time, he put that together," Wiedner said.

The firm started in 1973 with two lawyers, Frank J. Wiedner and John P. McAuliffe, and concentrated on workers' compensation defense, along with civil litigation. The firm's lawyers now also handle many liability matters, including transportation, construction and managed care cases involving health-care entities.

Stevenson became managing partner in January. He oversees personnel issues and budget matters.

"It's really all about keeping the firm healthy and making sure we're firing on all cylinders every day," Stevenson said.

In his role as a manager, the delegation of responsibility is important.

"I think when people are given responsibility, they will make things happen," Stevenson said.

For example, much of the firm's practice now involves electronic billing and compliance with clients' litigation guidelines. A couple of the firm's technology employees handle the complex job of integrating technology into its practice.

"Different clients have different guidelines on how they want us to service their accounts," Stevenson said. "Tying that all together really takes a centralized effort."

As a manager, Stevenson seeks consensus and tries to visit the St. Louis and Kansas City offices once a month. Partner Mark C. Wiedner regularly visits the Rockford office.

"I let people know decisions that may be impacting them," such as opening of the Kansas City office, Stevenson said. "I seek their input."

No immediate changes were



James W. Stevenson Jr.

Managing Partner, Wiedner & McAuliffe

- **Location:** Chicago
- **Revenue:** Declined to reveal 2013 figure
- **Lawyers:** 57
- **Age:** 53
- **Law school:** The John Marshall Law School, 1987
- **Organizations:** Trustee, Providence St. Mel School's board of trustees
- **Interests:** He enjoys spending time with his wife and their two adopted daughters from China, playing in adult hockey leagues, painting, reading and yoga

made when Stevenson became managing partner. He said the firm has had a strong executive committee and strong previous managers.

"It's been really keeping our best practice, which is client service, moving forward," he said of his management role.

He declined to identify the firm's clients by name. The firm represents retail and manufacturing businesses, the construction and transportation industries and school districts, primarily on workers' compensation and insurance defense matters.

The economic downturn several years ago resulted in Wiedner & McAuliffe re-evaluating its overall practice, including making sure its billing practices were efficient for clients. Some clients provided suggestions such as the use of electronic billing.

The firm now uses flat fees for some client work but for the most part still charges hourly rates for lawyers. Stevenson declined to provide a range of hourly rates.

"We feel we increased our level of service to clients," he said. "Internally, we had to keep a very close eye on costs."

Among Stevenson's hobbies is painting people and scenes on canvas, which he taught himself to do.

Stevenson "has a creative side to him that allows him to look at things a little differently than other people, in terms of problem-solving," Nesbit said.

Among Stevenson's goals as managing partner is "doing our best to resolve litigation, control costs and always be responsive to client needs," he said.

Stevenson mostly divides his time evenly between management duties and client matters.

As for his workers' compensation defense practice, Stevenson said the biggest change he's seen during his 27-year career involves technology.

"Things move at an increased speed at almost every law firm," Stevenson said. "You can't practice law like you did five years ago or 20 or 30 years ago."

Clients want effective, concise and quick replies to their questions and issues.

"We want to deliver that to them," Stevenson said.

Stevenson was born in Atlanta, Ga., and raised in Lake Bluff, Ill.

After his first year at The John Marshall Law School, he worked by day as a law clerk for William J. Harte. At that time, Wiedner & McAuliffe was in the same suite of offices with Harte.

Stevenson got to know the Wiedner & McAuliffe lawyers and joined the then-eight-member firm after he graduated from law school in 1987.

Wiedner & McAuliffe has continued growing, adding one partner and three associates last year.

During the past decade, the majority of associate hires previously worked at the firm as law clerks while attending law school.

The firm plans for continued growth in all of its offices.

"It's need-driven" by clients, Stevenson said. "I would like to see the total lawyer roster grow to 65 in a year."

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