

TOM GARDINER

Expanding His Grasp of PI, Corporate and Municipal Trial Law

by Elizabeth Davies

As Thomas G. Gardiner of Gardiner Koch Weisberg & Wrona looked across the green, he noticed something about the 15 other golfers on the course.

The friends had gathered for a bachelor party. But Gardiner soon realized they had one other thing in common: He was the lawyer for all but one of the golfers present that day.

In the circles of well-established businesspeople and elected officials, Gardiner's name frequents the "most recommended" list. He brings 37 years of experience to the table, with knowledge that runs the gamut from personal injury and medical malpractice law to corporate litigation and representing municipalities in court.

Such a breadth of legal expertise has come from years of learning and doing. He has tackled cases from varying areas of the law. Never has he worked fewer than 60 hours a week.

"I would learn an area of law as clients came to me," he says. "I would work into the night and call friends in that area of practice. That's still the case. If I'm working a case that requires a higher level of expertise, I'll call someone with a higher level of expertise.

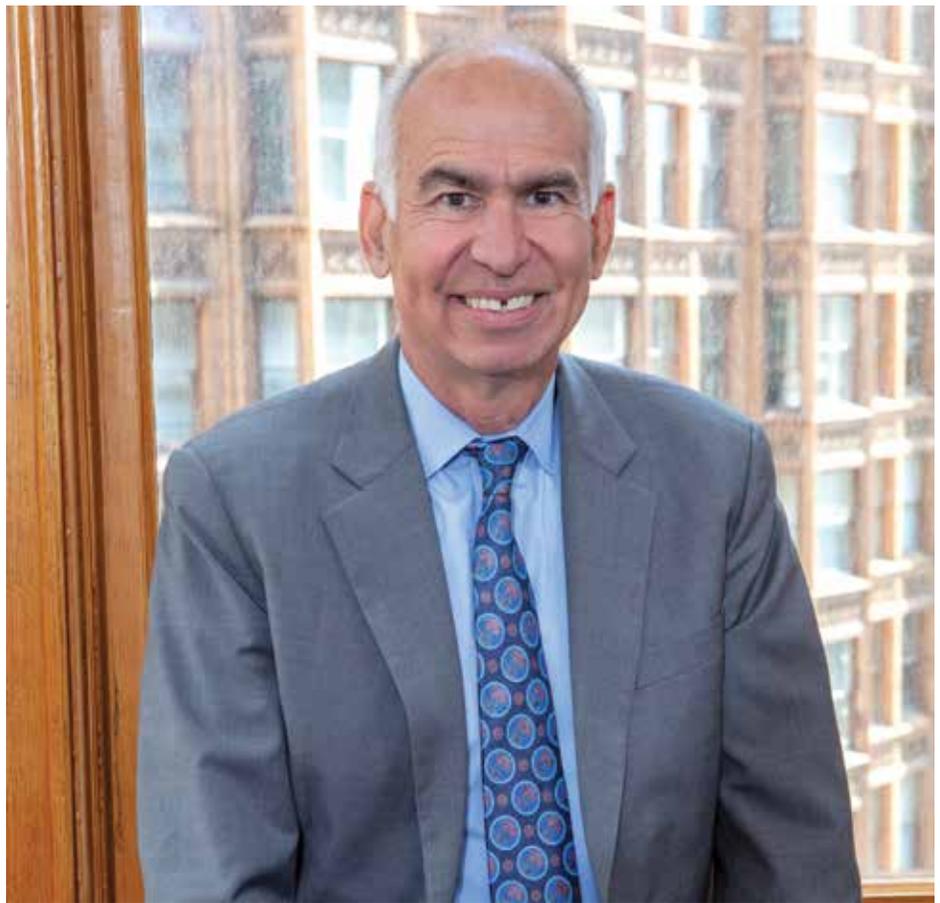
"The aim is to give the client the right answer, and I make sure we have the expertise to do that."

That's precisely why municipal lawyer Kathleen Field Orr has been sending clients to Gardiner for their litigation issues for the past 20 years. She recalls the time a client from central Illinois was in litigation regarding a tax increment financing district.

Such laws are detailed and complicated, Field Orr says. "He became an expert in this part of municipal law in a very short period of time and won the case on appeal. I was impressed with his ability to learn the law and come on-board without any questions."

Field Orr, who first met Gardiner while working out at the gym, appreciates his even-keeled nature and the way his personality evokes confidence in those around him.

"His work ethic is phenomenal," she says. "His knowledge of the law is excellent. The most important thing to me, as a lawyer, is the



way we service our clients. Tom concurs, so we are on the same page."

When Gardiner and firm co-founder Jim Koch first decided to launch their firm, they signed the shortest office lease they could get, which was one year. No one knew at that time where this pair of former assistant state's attorneys were going to take their budding practice. Certainly, no one would have imagined it growing into a 20-lawyer shop that would become the largest tenant in the office building.

FUN TO BE IN BUSINESS WITH

"At the time we started, we just wanted to be able to eat," Gardiner jokes now. "I thought we would expand, but I didn't know the extent to which we would expand. The growth was really based on clients referring us to more clients. Then, over the years, other lawyers began referring clients to us."

Gardiner and Koch's relationship goes back to their days working in the Cook County State's Attorney's Office.

"Jim had more work than he could handle," Gardiner recalls. "I knew his abilities, his integrity—and I knew he would be fun to be in business with."

So, along with lawyer John Hines, they hung their shingle and branched out on their own in 1992.

"I felt, at that point, I was able to represent

the clients well," Gardiner says. "Clients were coming to me, and my practice was increasing."

The firm lost a special member of its team in 2018 when Jim Koch succumbed to pancreatic cancer. "He was a terrific lawyer," Gardiner recalls.

That was evidenced by the two appearances Koch made before the U.S. Supreme Court. One of those cases, *Illinois v. Wardlow*, put a media spotlight on their firm as the court debated police search and seizures.

"It got so much press, it was a wild ride for all of us," Gardiner says. "Jim, Lynn Weisberg and I were on talk shows. We were on MSNBC. That case was way ahead of its time."

Today, the firm employs several lawyers who are experts in their fields, such as personal injury, medical malpractice and nursing home liability. In addition to its other work, the firm acts as general counsel to about 150 companies and more than 100 condominiums. It also handles litigation for several municipalities.

"I love the variety of the practice," Gardiner says. "It's more enjoyable to expand your breadth of knowledge. I also really like the entrepreneurial aspect of it."

JUDGE IMPRESSED WITH YOUNG LAWYER

Gardiner grew up in the south Chicago suburbs, the son of a Commonwealth Edison lineman who went to school at night so he

could move into management. Gardiner, it seemed, had a different bent.

"I always thought cases were interesting," he says. "I would read books on trials and lawyers. I liked public speaking and the analysis of problems."

So, it came as little surprise that, after graduating from the University of Illinois in three years with a degree in finance, Gardiner enrolled at Northwestern University School of Law.

He wasn't fully committed to a litigation practice until he clerked for U.S. District Court Judge John F. Grady. The judge was quickly impressed with Gardiner at his initial interview, but even more so after hearing that Gardiner had been the president of his high school senior class of 1,000 students.

"How did you manage to communicate to 1,000 students to get elected?" Judge Grady asked.

"I tracked them down," Gardiner told him. "I said, 'My name is Tom Gardiner, and I'm running for class president. Vote for me.'"

"It was a sign of inventiveness," Grady says. "I knew he would be a good law clerk, so I hired him on the spot."

During his yearlong stint with the judge, Gardiner watched up close the three-month trial of the Marquette 10—a group of West Side Chicago police officers accused of taking bribes to cover up a drug-selling ring. Along with Judge Grady's encouragement to choose the state's attorney's office over a large law firm, the experience set the stage for Gardiner's career in litigation.

"If you want to be a trial lawyer, you go to the state's attorney's office," Grady told him. "You'll learn to try cases there."

"It wasn't long before he started trying big cases, and I could read about him in the newspaper, so I could follow his career," says Grady. "I was thrilled I had some part in steering him in the right direction."

Grady also impressed on Gardiner the need for a solid work ethic.

"He always said that no one ever became a good lawyer who worked 9 to 5," Gardiner recalls. "He was so keen on learning the law and trying to reach decisions that were fair and just. He is a remarkable man."

So, just a year out of law school, Gardiner took a job with the Cook County State's Attorney's Office. Four years later, he was the supervisor of the public integrity unit, where he brought cases against public officials and tried hired hit cases.

"Because of my experience with Judge Grady, in part, they put me on a fast track," Gardiner recalls. "So, I spent six months in the municipal courts, then I worked at 26th Street full-time."

Gardiner's years in the state's attorney's office

brought a share of sordid tales. He tried a case in which a father hired someone to kill his son to claim his life insurance policy. In another case, he brought charges against a police officer and former police officer who collaborated to rob a Chicago jewelry store.

Ready for a change, Gardiner headed into private practice at McBride Baker & Coles, which later merged into Holland & Knight. There, he learned the nuances of civil litigation from lawyers he respected.

"That was a tremendously valuable experience for me," he says. "I had done criminal law, but this gave me experience in handling civil cases. It was really good to be involved in sophisticated civil litigation."

By 1992, Gardiner was signing that short-term lease to launch a firm with friends. It's a decision he has treasured every day since. For Gardiner, work has never been about maximizing profit. It's been a career based on making a difference and enjoying himself while doing it.

"Tom is focused on getting his job done as quickly and efficiently as possible," Judge Grady says. "He is not interested in chargeable hours. He just wants to get things done."

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LIFE ON WISCONSIN SHEEP FARM

When you see Gardiner walking into court, it might be hard to reconcile that high-powered lawyer with the 33-acre sheep farm he left that morning.

In reality, though, Gardiner and his wife, Margaret, live on a farm near Lake Geneva, Wisconsin. They share it with 275 sheep, five dogs, chickens, a horse, a pony and a donkey.

Such a life is a reprieve from litigating for Gardiner. His home is filled with oil paintings done by his artist wife. He enjoys watching her compete in sheepherding events, and so he doesn't mind the collection of sheep and dogs on their property. And because he believes firmly in making his local community better, he has served on his town's planning commission, public safety committee and school board.

Public service began quite early for Gardiner. He was appointed to be a community college trustee at age 24, just two months after graduating from law school. He went on to serve that board for 12 years, five of them as

chairman. During nine of those years, he also served on the Glenwood Village Board.

Roles such as those are important to Gardiner. "There's a big difference between communities that make good decisions and communities that make bad decisions. Law gives you such a breadth of knowledge. It puts you in a strong position to be a good contributor."

Such experiences, Gardiner says, give him more of a base to work from when he arrives in court to handle municipal litigation.

"I have the benefit of being on both sides," he says. "I've been an elected official, I've been an appointed official and I've been the lawyer. So, it gives me a lot of perspective."

He also continues to invest in the future legal community as a professor at Northwestern University School of Law, where he teaches trial practice. He finds it refreshing to spend time with young minds, and he appreciates their points of view.

"They come to the problem with different solutions than I would anticipate," he says. "They come in with fewer preordained approaches, which makes you think."

In the bit of spare time Gardiner has remaining, you'll likely find him playing sports, just like he did as a boy. He plays basketball once or twice a week, competes in triathlons, swims most days and water skis frequently over the summer.

"These things that were fun to me at age 12 are still fun to me now," he says.

Working hard—and playing hard—are both part of the recipe that has led to Gardiner's professional success.

They are the reason he and partner John Wrona have secured tens of millions of dollars in medical malpractice and injury verdicts and settlements.

And they are the reason his firm now routinely handles more than 100 personal injury, medical malpractice, trucking, nursing home and product liability cases at any given time.

Gardiner was also part of a team of lawyers who received a verdict of \$21 million in a wrongful conviction case.

He has established a career he enjoys, and he surrounds himself with others who enjoy it as well.

That, he says, gives him and his colleagues at Gardiner Koch the drive to go the extra mile for their clients.

"The growth we've experienced is really because we have talented lawyers who are responsive to clients," he says. "The other partners—Lynn Weisberg, John Wrona, Jenni Airato, Barry Owen, Michelle LaGrotta and Kellie Sellman—made this happen."

"And, they've made it an enjoyable place to work." ■