

MARY INNIS

IP Litigator Works Where She Likes Where She Works

by Jordyn Reiland

For Mary E. Innis of Innis Law Group LLC, being a good lawyer is a combination of collaboration, mastering the subject matter, and building meaningful relationships with clients.

“People I’ve worked with for many years will go on and do other things, and they will still call me,” Innis says. “A lot of it is because they feel like I really partnered with them and treated everyone with respect and, of course, got good results.”

Innis prides herself in providing “bespoke” service, that is, individualized attention to each of her clients. And they recognize that.

“Mary is a great listener, she is very responsive, she knows the subject matter very well and is very comfortable dealing with high-level clients,” says Michael Burke, an assistant general counsel at Tribune Publishing Inc.

This individuality is a theme that carries throughout much of her life, especially in her office.

With an original Andy Warhol, some fashion designer sketches, Chicago Cubs memorabilia and a hand-cut, one-of-a-kind wooden table, Innis considers her office an extension of her home. That is on purpose.

“A client once said, ‘I love coming to your office because I feel like I am coming to somebody’s cool apartment,’” says Innis. “That is the feel I want because I do spend long hours here.”

This unique approach to her intellectual property firm is very different from what she was used to prior to starting her own firm.

“You have got a lot of people who go to law school in a very competitive environment, and then they are pitted against each other. Instead of saying to your client, ‘How can I serve you, how can I give you value?’ their mindset is ‘How can I prove to you that I am the smartest person in the room?’ and I think that is a big mistake,” Innis says. “I do not want to practice in that arena.”

PEOPLE PERSON GETTING STARTED

While Innis was attending Augustana College, she was not exactly sure what her future would hold. Almost on a whim, Innis



decided to take the LSAT and scored in the 99th percentile.

Because she took the test late, Innis had to petition to apply to law schools. She ended up attending Boston University School of Law and graduated in 1987.

Innis was interested in federal litigation and trials and wanted to be able to do work people could relate to.

“I have always been attracted to the advertising world, the fashion world and the legal world,” she says. “It was kind of a compilation of those things that led me to this area.”

Innis moved back to Illinois and got a job at a boutique firm in 1987 doing intellectual property work.

While at the firm for 16 years, Innis was the only female equity partner, and that was challenging, she says.

“It was also, to me, very surprising that in

that day and age I was still having to be on the front lines of that battle,” Innis says. “I grew up in a family of seven children in a very non-sexist environment because when you have that many kids, everyone has to pull their own share.”

And her parents remained a big part of her life. “Every time I am in front of a jury or a judge, I feel like I am a people person,” Innis says. “I grew up in a big, collaborative family with great parents who instilled in us to value the dignity of each person.”

Even with some of the difficulties at that firm, Innis was glad she gained experiences there that helped her learn and grow.

“I got great experience there. The firm had phenomenal clients, I did a lot of trial work, and I feel that it really prepared me for facing other sorts of obstacles,” she adds.

“Hopefully, I have taken something from each experience that’s brought me here today

and has enabled me to manage my firm in a way that works in my life and works in my associates' lives."

Innis then went on in 2003 with her mentor, Edward G. Wierzbicki, and with other colleagues to open the Chicago office of Loeb & Loeb LLP.

"The most important thing (Wierzbicki) did was open the doors to relationships with his clients," Innis says. "He showed them the ropes from a management standpoint."

After becoming partner and spending six years at the firm, Innis went on to Barnes & Thornburg LLP where she chaired the Advertising and Marketing Practices Group.

LITIGATING CASES NIMBLY

Now Innis manages her Clark Street firm. It handles intellectual property litigation, including trademarks, copyrights, unfair competition, advertising and promotions, and the rights of publicity and privacy.

She has extensive experience in all aspects of the production and execution of advertising agreements, marketing contracts and promotions, sweepstakes review, sponsorship agreements, talent agreements, music licenses, promotion fulfillment and creative service agency agreements.

The firm started in 2011 with one attorney and one paralegal. It now has four attorneys and access to part-time workers on a contract basis, Innis says.

Senior associate Lucille Mackey, who has worked with Innis for close to 10 years, knew from the beginning she wanted to build a strong relationship with her.

"When she was opening her own firm, I jumped at the chance to work with her every day," she says.

Mackey describes the firm's matters as a "broad range of work for a lot of very interesting and high-profile clients."

"The caliber of work you are doing is very high, especially as an associate," she says.

While the firm was successful from the get-go because of her previous client relationships, Innis says revenue has continued to grow exponentially.

"We can litigate cases in a more nimble manner than other folks can," she offers.

She also attributes success to her flexibility. One reason Innis started her own firm was the inflexible nature of her past firms especially when she had to take care of her parents who were both ill.

"This environment allows me to work remotely quite often, and it's seamless," she says, noting she allows the same kind of flexibility for her employees. "The flexibility is part of the key to success."

But it's also about availability, she says. "All my clients have my cell number. It could be 1 a.m. and I will answer the phone and make sure (my clients) are taken care of no matter what."

Innis considers herself and her associates experts in their field, something she believes is a big advantage to her clients and the success of her business.

"Our clients get really good value because my people stay (with a client) from the beginning until the end," she says. "You don't see that at a larger firm."

Given Innis' subject matter expertise, Burke says she is his go-to person whenever he has questions about intellectual property and marketing law.

In her work for Tribune Publishing Inc., Burke says, Innis was able to effectively articulate a complicated legal issue with their management team on a tight timeframe.

"She possesses all the things an in-house counsel would want from an outside counsel," he says.

Burke also considers Innis a friend. The two have similar interests and enjoy skiing and going to concerts together.

IN THE LONG RUN

Mackey says that while she started working with Innis nearly a decade ago, she still considers her a mentor.

"She's an innovative thinker, so she comes up with creative solutions and strategies that I think a lot of other attorneys wouldn't," she says. "Some attorneys are always saying 'no' because that can be an easier answer sometimes."

For example, Mackey says that in a matter where they represented a high-profile fashion designer, Innis was able to successfully prosecute creative and unique causes of action to ensure that the designer's rights were protected.

What is next for the law firm and for Innis is simple: continued success.

The future will also include spending more time at her home in the mountains where she enjoys skiing and hiking. Innis is an avid Cubs fan and likes to watch many of Chicago's other sports teams as well.

Her other interests include music, art and film. She is a member of the Sundance Institute and even gives a continuing legal education event at the festival each year. Innis Law Group is also very involved in Lawyers for the Creative Arts.

"I'm in this for the long run... I would like to end my career here," Innis says.

"I used to feel a sense of dread at other jobs I've had—not because of the work but because of the environment. Here, I love coming to work every day." ■