

## Illinois Powerhouse: Willkie

By **Thy Vo**

*Law360 (August 23, 2023, 2:03 PM EDT)* -- Three years after a team of seasoned litigation partners started Willkie Farr & Gallagher LLP's Chicago office, the firm's growing Midwest outpost has ensured a reputation for handling high-stakes boardroom investigations and complex corporate suits, including a \$10.5 million damages win for Provisur Technologies Inc. in November.

A "crisp" focus on corporate needs has made Willkie's Chicago office a top choice to handle companies' "most important strategic, reputational and economic matters," said Willkie's Midwest chairman Craig C. Martin, who chaired Jenner & Block LLP's Chicago headquarters before leaving that firm with five other partners to launch the Willkie office at the start of the pandemic. The firm's achievements in the past year have also earned it a spot among the Illinois Powerhouses featured on Law360's 2023 Regional Powerhouses list.

Over the last year, Willkie's Chicago attorneys have been in the courtroom on behalf of a number of big companies and high-profile individuals.

The January enhanced damages award for Provisur, a maker of industrial food equipment, came after a two-week trial in which the jury found competitor Weber Inc. had willfully infringed on its patents. Pfizer has also retained the trial-focused firm to defend it against patent infringement allegations related to its coronavirus vaccines, while global chemical distributor Univar Solutions is relying on Willkie in nearly a dozen putative class actions alleging price-fixing in the sale of fertilizers.

Martin and founding partner Sara T. Horton also represented Seagram heiress Clare Bronfman until June in a civil action related to her role in the purported NXIVM sex cult. Martin has also been working since December for the special litigation committee of a large public company under investigation by the U.S. Department of Justice, according to the firm.

Companies come to Willkie in Chicago for its expertise in dealing with big-dollar "existential" problems that not only end up in the courts, but also the press, said Martin.

The office launched in March 2020 in the early days of the COVID-19 shutdowns. With six experienced partners and a full book of business, Willkie's office in Chicago grew to two dozen lawyers within two weeks, said Martin. And while the 1,200-lawyer international law firm's new outpost faced all the usual



challenges of pandemic work, Willkie was also able to scoop up talented associates just coming off federal clerkships and who faced delayed start times at other BigLaw offices, Martin said.

Today, the Chicago office has expanded its ranks to 80 attorneys, about 50 of whom are focused on trials and investigations. The firm is also growing its nonlitigation roster, with nearly two dozen lawyers experienced in areas like finance and corporate restructuring. One of the founding partners, Barbara Grayson, represents high-net-worth individuals and families through the firm's growing private clients practice.

"Our goal is to continue to build out and become a full-service Chicago office. And we're doing it very thoughtfully, deliberately and strategically," said Matt D. Basil, another founding partner.

That includes the addition of four lateral partners, with former Mayer Brown LLP managing partner Debra Bogó-Ernst the latest to join in Chicago in March after more than two decades at her previous firm. The opportunity was "too good to pass up," said Bogó-Ernst, who heads Willkie's class action practice.

"Willkie Chicago is a true trial lawyers' firm. It's not right for every case, but it's great to be at a firm where opposing counsel knows we're not only willing to try a case, but we're also really good at it," said Bogó-Ernst. "It changes the dynamics considerably."

She also praised the office's diversity-focused leadership and culture, and involvement in community boards and organizations.

"It's amazing to see the best of the best operating in such an inclusive environment," Bogó-Ernst said, noting half the founding partners are women.

The firm also has an active pro bono practice, including working on civil rights cases, voting and elections issues and representing incarcerated individuals.

Last June, Willkie attorneys from the Chicago office accompanied two Fulton County, Georgia, election workers as they testified before Congress' Jan. 6 committee about their experience being falsely accused of voter fraud in the 2020 election.

Early next year, Martin and other Willkie attorneys will also retry a damages case after an Illinois jury in 2019 found a prison health care provider liable for failures to treat a kidney cancer patient while he was incarcerated. The 7th Circuit threw out an \$8 million damages award and sent the case back for a new trial.

The firm also has a culture of community service, said Horton, a founding partner who co-chairs the intellectual property litigation practice.

For his part, Martin is on the boards of a number local organizations, including the Ann & Robert H. Lurie Children's Hospital of Chicago and Chicago Urban League.

The firm also helps young lawyers find opportunities to get valuable litigation experience and serve in leadership roles in local bar groups and community organizations, said Horton, who herself is a member of the Children's Research Fund's board of directors. She also serves on Law360's 2023 IP editorial advisory board.

"We're actively looking for ways for [lawyers] to get involved in the community to help them figure out where they might use their talents," said Horton.

An experienced litigator who is part of the Provisur litigation team, Horton said founding Willkie's Chicago office and helping to lead its IP team has been a formative experience and "huge stepping stone."

"I've been around, but being the most junior founder, coming over to Willkie allowed me to step up and shine in a new leadership role," said Horton.

--Editing by Lakshna Mehta.

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