

Q&A WITH JOHN DELIKANAKIS

Be a counselor for your client, not just a hired gun

John Delikanakis joined Snell & Wilmer in 2005 because of a bitter dispute between two prominent doctors. “It was hard-fought and protracted litigation,” Delikanakis recalled. “Kelly Evans represented one doctor, and I represented the other. Although everything was a fight in that case, it was a clean fight. I liked the way he litigated. We got the case resolved.” The admiration must have been mutual, because sometime afterward, Evans approached Delikanakis about joining Snell & Wilmer’s Las Vegas office — and “the rest is history,” Delikanakis says.

How do you view your role as a commercial litigator?

It’s twofold, really. Whether in a courtroom or at a negotiation, my job is to intelligently and convincingly advocate a client’s position to effect the client’s goals. My job is also to act as a counselor with a litigator’s perspective to help shape a client’s litigation goals, guide them away from litigation when it makes business sense to do so, or to prepare a client for an inevitable lawsuit so we are ready to effectively and efficiently prosecute or defend it. I’ve found that an ongoing counselor’s role builds long-lasting relationships with clients, as opposed to just being “a hired gun” on an as-needed basis. In doing so, I think I enjoy the best of both worlds.

Why Las Vegas? Why Nevada?

At first, out of necessity, and later out of an appreciation for Las Vegas and Nevada. Prior to coming to Nevada in 1996, I would have been hard pressed to correctly place it on the map. I just knew it was big and it was out West. I grew up in a suburb of Chicago, spent my college years in New York’s Hudson Valley and afterward lived and worked in New York City, Greece and Chicago. The West was just not on my radar.

After law school and while clerking for a justice on the Nebraska Supreme Court, I got a notion that I wanted to be a litigator. I’d heard that things were pretty good in states like Idaho, Wyoming, Utah and Arizona, so I started applying for litigation positions. It was a bit of an adventure. I came to Las Vegas, interviewed with the Thorndal Backus Armstrong firm and was hired. It was a lot of fun, and I learned a lot. Some of my best friendships started at that firm.

As time passed, Las Vegas and Nevada grew on me. I’ve come to love the giant empty spaces up north and the cloudless sky. Nevadans are sometimes quirky and always independent in thought and deed. I like that. This really is a unique place.

What do commercial clients look for in a lawyer?

Efficiency is a word I rightfully hear over and over from clients. Litigation is expensive for businesses and often consumes a lot of management’s time and emotions. I think large, regional law firms are well suited to provide efficient representation to commercial clients, because our base of expertise and experience representing different industries is so broad and deep. Whether the litigation relates to energy, immigration, employment, tax, mining, securities, intellectual property or Indian law, I’m able to find a colleague who has the knowledge the client needs and has prior experience in the client’s industry. We



► **John Delikanakis**, of the law firm Snell & Wilmer, stresses the importance of learning clients’ business operations. (CHRISTOPHER DeVARGAS/STAFF)

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generally don’t need to reinvent the wheel or “get up to speed” on a particular area of the law or industry.

Clients also want lawyers who understand their business. For a few years, I served as associate general counsel for Park Place Entertainment, which later was acquired by Harrah’s. One of the more frustrating things I encountered as an in-house lawyer was dealing with outside counsel who had no understanding of the company or its operations. The firms and lawyers that educated themselves on our business got the assignment more often than not.

You are on the board of the Las Vegas Global Economic Alliance. Please tell us about that.

The LVGEA is an economic development policy group of like-minded Las Vegas business leaders, professionals, educators and politicians. It is the successor to the Nevada Development Authority.

It’s exciting. The LVGEA has shown exceptional leadership by identifying and vigorously support-

ing laws, education reform and economic policies that are crucial to fostering diversified economic growth. It is run by a group of young, smart people. We have our work cut out for us, but I know we will succeed.

What maxims do you live by?

I have a few. The first is “family first.”

The second is one I learned from a mentor from New York City, Andrew Lanyi. He was an extraordinary man. He liked to say that patience, knowledge and discipline were the keys to success.

The last maxim I learned from my crew coach at Vassar, Scott Sanford, who always said, “Row your own boat” — in other words, don’t look over to other boats during a race, as the motion of doing so checked the progress of our own racing shell and also mentally distracted us from concentrating on doing what was necessary to win. I’ve always thought it’s a pretty good maxim to live by in general.