

NEW JERSEY LAWYER

Volume 16, Number 18

The Lawyer's Source

April 30, 2007

\$5

By Kris W. Scibiorski

Sometimes, you don't have to go very far to get somewhere good.

Take Brian J. Molloy, who just took command as managing director at Wilentz, Goldman & Spitzer — one of the state's largest and best-known law firms.

He works two miles from his childhood home, went to high school one town over and earned his law degree all the way over, if you will, in Newark.

Not bad for a genuine New Jersey guy at a genuine New Jersey firm.

And, now, after nearly 30 years at Wilentz, he's its head guy.

But he also lets anyone within earshot know he's not about to give up his first and remaining professional love — litigating — for an overabundance of operational pencil-pushing.

On the other hand, he certainly isn't barren of ideas on where the firm should be headed.

Molloy — only the fourth lawyer to hold the top spot at Wilentz in 30 years — makes it clear his leadership won't bring drastic changes to the venerable 160-lawyer firm, but rather some timely tweaking — at least for now.

"We like what's happening and I don't want to change that; I don't want to screw it up," he said, chuckling. "We want to continue to practice in the areas where we are strong, but also to expand the firm's footprint."

To see the ongoing strength, the Woodbridge native needs only look from his ninth-floor window — "across a parking lot," as he likes to say — to one of his firm's biggest, longest-running and high-profile clients — Hess Corp.

For the future, Wilentz's "smart growth" strategy includes expanding the corporate transactional, intellectual property and environmental practices in both Woodbridge and Philadelphia.

"We want it to become a full-service office," Molloy said of Philadelphia, where the firm acquired the litigation practice of Silverman Bernheim & Vogel operation in January.



Photo by Kris W. Scibiorski

Lawyer in the News

Mr. Big at Wilentz

While he hesitates to disclose the specifics, he acknowledges Wilentz is in serious discussions with a transactional practice group to complement the Philadelphia office.

Merger?

Additionally, he said, he "wouldn't be surprised" if Wilentz merges with a medium-sized New Jersey firm before year's end.

However, unlike some large New Jersey firms that have been expanding or merging with mega-firms in the Boston to Washington, D.C. corridor, Wilentz's plans are more

Jersey- and Philadelphia-centric.

Among large Garden State-based firms, Molloy noted, Wilentz also is unique in having a robust personal services group that handles toxic torts, personal injury, family, matrimonial and criminal matters.

For the Westfield resident whose practice includes legal malpractice defense, the focus on personal services is a significant part of the firm's DNA.

"We remember that since David T. Wilentz started his small firm in South Amboy, we've always done those types of things," he said.

The late David Wilentz, a former New Jersey attorney general and a Democratic king-maker, was the scion of a family that produced two of New Jersey's most-prominent attorneys — the late Chief Justice Robert N. Wilentz, and his brother, Warren W. Wilentz, who remains involved with the firm despite a major auto accident several years ago.

Even today, the firm remains one of the state's best-connected firms in Democratic Party circles, wielding significant government clout, especially in Middlesex County.

Molloy, 53, has been at Wilentz since 1978, the year he graduated from Seton Hall University School of Law. In addition to legal malpractice cases, he also works on complex commercial litigation and unfair-competition claims.

However, like a true litigator, he feels most comfortable in the court-room.

“I love trial work,” he exclaimed. “I believe I’m very good at cross-examining people and like advising business clients through their legal problems.”

Molloy, who chairs the firm’s commercial litigation team and is president of Wilentz’s sports management subsidiary, replaces John A. Hoffman, a shareholder specializing in municipal authority and public utility law.

Greatest challenge

He said that the legal malpractice part of his business is both among the most-rewarding and uniquely challenging aspects of his work.

“I’m flattered every time a law firm chooses me to represent one of their attorneys,” said Molloy, who has represented lawyers from firms like Nixon Peabody and the former Pitney Hardin.

“But, it is challenging because the clients are usually smarter than I am and also are very hands-on during trial and preparation,” he said, with a bit of a smile.

“It is also an odd field — even when you have a victory, your client doesn’t want you to publicize it because they don’t want anybody to know that there even was a claim against them.”

He noted that despite the additional responsibilities as managing partner, he fully intends to continue in all three of his practice areas.

“I like the mix; I like that I have a very varied practice,” he explained.

Adding to that mix will be the responsibility for the Hess account, traditionally the managing partner’s domain.

Clearly his fondness for the law has been passed to his two children, Brooke and Evan, law students at the University of San Francisco and Rutgers Law School-Camden, respectively.

The Jersey-centered Molloy jokes that the firm’s “strict anti-nepotism rules” are the only thing stopping him from pushing the firm to open a West Coast office to accommodate his daughter.

Outside the law, Molloy and his wife, Christina, are members of the Echo Lake Country Club in Westfield, where he continues working to lower his 20 handicap, while still enjoying the relaxing aspects of the game.

Another favorite pastime involves weekends at his Jersey Shore house — just a quick run south on the Garden State Parkway.

What else would anyone expect from a genuine New Jersey guy!