

THE ORIGINALS

The First, First-Year Associate

THE LEGAL PROFESSION HAS CHANGED A LOT OVER THE PAST 40 YEARS. AS PART OF OUR 40TH ANNIVERSARY CELEBRATION, WE THOUGHT IT WOULD BE INTERESTING TO TAKE A STEP BACK IN TIME WITH “THE ORIGINALS” – THE SEVEN ATTORNEYS WHO JOINED JOHNSON & BELL IN THE 1970S AND STILL ARE PRACTICING TODAY. WE SAT DOWN WITH EACH OF THEM TO FIND OUT HOW THE LEGAL PROFESSION HAS EVOLVED, WHAT CASES BUILT THE FIRM OR THEIR OWN INDIVIDUAL CAREERS, AND THE VARIED PATHS THEIR RESPECTIVE CAREERS HAVE TAKEN OVER THE PAST FOUR DECADES. WE HOPE YOU ENJOY THEIR INDIVIDUAL STORIES.

As Shareholder and Treasurer of Johnson & Bell, Ltd., Brian C. Fetzer has tried over one hundred cases to verdict and earned numerous accolades, including being named one of *Chicago Magazine’s* “Top Defense Lawyers.” So, it might be hard to imagine him fresh out of law school as the firm’s first, first-year associate hired 40 years ago.

It was 1975 and the recent Northwestern University Law School grad says he wanted to “try cases more than anything,” and had set his sights on working as a prosecutor at the State’s Attorney’s office in Cook County.

“I realized as professional as everyone was based on the interviews, they were also a lot of fun and enjoyed things outside of work.”

And while he applied there, he also began interviewing at firms such as Kirkland & Ellis, where he learned a group of lawyers, including well-known defense attorney William D. Maddux, was about to leave to start a new firm.



Fetzer followed the lead and in December interviewed at the new firm, William D. Maddux & Associates, the future Johnson & Bell.

“On the spot they offered me the job,” Fetzer says, noting that his first day of work was Dec. 27, which coincidentally was his birthday and the firm’s first Christmas party. “I realized at the party that everyone I had met during my interviews was extremely professional, but they were also a lot of fun and enjoyed things outside of work.”

Ironically, Fetzer notes a few days later his dream came true in the form of a job offer from the State’s Attorney’s office. Describing himself as someone who was raised to uphold a commitment, he turned down the offer. “Sometimes the best decisions you make are to say no to something,” Fetzer reflects. “And it turned out to be the best decision I ever made.”

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Early on in his career, Fetzer was given primary responsibility on client matters, trying his first case four months later. “We didn’t have a formal training program,” he says. In fact, his focus in malpractice began when Maddux handed him a dozen files containing letters from insurers about potential medical malpractice cases, and asked him to do an analysis of each file. “I sat there with a medical dictionary reading the documents, reading the term and then looking up a term used in the definition.”

Mentors such as Maddux and Bill Johnson, who was hired a few months before Fetzer, were also important to his training. “It was an incredibly great learning experience,” he says.

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At age 27, Fetzer received a not-guilty verdict in a brain damage at childbirth case. The defense had offered \$600,000 to settle the case, but the plaintiffs rejected it. At the time, it was the largest rejected settlement offer to secure a not-guilty verdict. “That was one of the springboards of my career.”

One of the biggest changes in the last 40 years, Fetzer says, has been the decline in camaraderie among other lawyers in town, as well as within the firm. Back then it was common for a half dozen or more people to lunch together on a daily basis, he recalls. Johnson & Bell also held daily staff meetings, called “Muster,” which took place at 9 a.m. in Maddux’s office. “We had a lot of fun together; there wasn’t a lot of structure. You’d go over the court call. All the matters in court for that morning would be parceled out.”

The meetings outgrew Maddux’s office and moved into the library and eventually stopped, Fetzer says. “Now we’re on four floors. There are attorneys I don’t see for weeks.”

Some things have remained constant, he says, including the firm’s willingness to give its younger attorneys responsibility for handling client matters. Back then, “I was introduced to clients immediately,” he says. “The more depth a client recognizes the firm has, the more business they will send you.” And he adds, “I think the idea of giving young lawyers responsibility continues today.”

CHICAGO OFFICE

33 W. Monroe St. / Suite 2700 / Chicago, IL 60603
phone (312) 372-0770 / phone (312) 372-9818

INDIANA OFFICE

11051 Broadway / Suite B / Crown Point, IN 46307
phone (219) 791-1900 / phone (219) 791-1901
info@johnsonandbell.com

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TRIAL LAWYERS

