

## BUFFALO BUSINESS FIRST

### HOW I...

# Practice law and run a firm

## WITTLIN KEPT HIS CORPORATE CLIENTS WHEN NAMED MANAGING PARTNER

**A** native of Williamsville, Craig Wittlin was elected managing partner at Harter Secrest & Emery LLP earlier this year.

He works at the firm's headquarters in Rochester, where it's the largest law firm in the market with more than 100 attorneys.

Wittlin joined the Rochester office in 1992, two years before Harter Secrest & Emery opened the Buffalo office, which has 25 attorneys.

He is responsible for the firm's strategic direction and daily operations of five offices. As a corporate attorney, he counsels clients on a range of matters including mergers and acquisitions and securities and capital markets transactions.

He has advised Fortune 500 and Fortune 1000 companies.

Maintaining his practice is something that's important to Wittlin despite the expansion of his leadership role. Many predecessors gave up their practice while taking on the managing partner role, but he's ready for the challenge of doing both. At 48, he is one of the youngest managing partners in the firm's 123-year history.

I've had a busy law practice with a lot of terrific clients whom I really enjoy working with, so when I started thinking about becoming managing partner, one thing that was most important to me was not taking my hand out of the practice of law. It's a fairly common model for us to have a managing partner who is full time in the leadership of the firm, but I really didn't want to do that.

I wanted to strike the right balance which means a couple of things. In order to do that, it requires really talented lawyers whom I work with because I can't do everything. The days of me rolling up my sleeves and

billing 2,000 hours a year are over, so I need a lot of help. I have partners, associates and other colleagues who are really talented and can help in that regard.

The other thing it takes is a dedicated senior staff and the ability to delegate to them. Let your chief financial officer, your director of business development, your director of professional development do their jobs.

Part of the process of me freeing up the time to be able to practice and do the management part is relying on them, trusting their judgment and getting my partners to rely on them, as well.

My goals in this position are probably more about clients than they are about the firm. I think if we achieve the client

**"We really do believe that when you put all of your energies behind figuring out what the client needs, delivering it on a cost-effective basis and being transparent with the clients, then you can inject a level of excellence into your overall service," said Craig Wittlin.**



JIM COURTNEY

### CRAIG WITTLIN

**Position:** Managing partner, Harter Secrest & Emery LLP

**Duties:** Strategic leadership for 130 lawyers and a total staff of 250

**Experience:** 23 years of practicing law

**Offices:** Buffalo, Rochester, Albany, Corning, New York City

**Age:** 48

**Lives in:** Rochester

**Education:** Managerial law and public policy, Syracuse University, 1989; Albany Law School, 1992

goals, the firm goals will follow. We've adapted a new strategic plan that focuses on teamwork, excellence and entrepreneurship. And when I think about the first two of those, they are very much client-facing goals.

Our belief is if we function better as teams and put our energy behind finding ways to work together, the client is going to get better service and value and a better package of legal services that they can use productively.

I was born and raised in Buffalo, I went to Syracuse University as an undergraduate and then to Albany Law School, so I've spent my entire life on the Thruway. I got married right after the bar exam, before I started working, and my wife had grown up in Syracuse, so we were looking at Buffalo, Rochester and Syracuse as possibilities of where to go.

I ended up in Rochester because that was the best job offer I got. Had I gotten an equivalent offer in Buffalo, there's very little doubt that's where I would have ended up. It's where my heart was and where I envisioned myself starting a career.

One thing that happened a few years after, which was really fortuitous, is that we opened our Buffalo

office.

So that gave me an opportunity to spend more time in Buffalo. As my career progressed, it got harder and harder to leave Rochester on a permanent basis because I have clients and a practice there but easier and easier to spend increasing amounts of time in Buffalo. And now in my new role, I'm here a lot. I'm here at least a couple of days a month. I spend a lot of time with our Buffalo partners. I also think there is an opportunity for me to spend time developing work in the market.

I think being a Buffalo guy certainly helps with my level of engagement with the Buffalo office. I was born in the late 1960s and didn't leave here to go to college until the mid-'80s, so I've seen the city in a lot of different iterations.

I've seen the city struggling and seen the city thriving. So it is not lost on me that there's a real renaissance going on in this city. It's tangible. It's the kind of renaissance that if you haven't seen the city in those different versions, it's hard to understand.

– Michael Petro