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Spilman Thomas & Battle celebrate 150th anniversary



Tom Hindman photo David P. Ferretti, Eric W. Iskra, Heather Heiskell Jones & Michael J. Basile of Spilman Thomas & Battle said although it's important to remember the firm's history, it's equally important to look toward the future.

Spilman, Thomas & Battle planned themed events throughout year to mark milestone

By ANDREA LANNOM

Daily Mail Staff

As Spilman Thomas & Battle celebrates its 150th anniversary, attorneys with the firm say it's not only important to celebrate the firm's history but also to look forward to see what's next.

Throughout the year, the firm has planned themed events to reflect its 150th birthday. Attorneys mentioned that SuperVision, a labor and employment law hot topic series, was themed "what's next" in honor of its anniversary. The firm reflects the concept on its website and celebrates in-house with events like firm history trivia contests.

"It's a yearlong celebration that kicked off in January," said Eric Iskra, an attorney in charge of client relations. "We had a virtual gathering of all offices by video link, had a champagne toast and talked about key events in the firm's history."

The group also commissioned a book, written by Elizabeth Jill Wilson and published earlier this year. Since the firm has served DuPont for almost 100 years, the prologue was written by Thomas Sager, senior vice president and general counsel for the chemical giant. Iskra said the book has been a "long time coming."

He described his firm's story as "appended to the state's history." In fact, the practice celebrates its anniversary a year after West Virginia celebrated its sesquicentennial.

The firm got its start in Charleston back in 1864 when its founders Colonel Benjamin Harrison Smith and Edward Boardman Knight formed the firm Smith & Knight, which would become known as Spilman Thomas & Battle in 1943.

And since then, the office has expanded to six other offices, first branching out to Morgantown, then locating to Pittsburgh, Wheeling, Winston-Salem, N.C., Roanoke, Va., and Harrisburg, Pa. Its 133 lawyers represent clients ranging from Fortune 500 companies to entrepreneurs.

David Ferretti, an attorney in charge of lawyer administration, said the firm has grown significantly in the last century.

"But we've tried to do it in a strategic fashion that makes it as easy as possible. We tend to hire people not in large groups or mergers with existing firms but by individuals, which helps us maximize a long-lasting relationship. I started in 1981 ... and 20 years ago, we had 46 lawyers. We've almost tripled."

Ferretti and Iskra explained the areas of law have changed too, noting the practices of environmental, government relations and labor and employment law have experienced a lot of growth over the years.

“Fields that certainly, 150 years ago, even 50 years ago, were not as prominent as they are today like environmental law, banking regulations, federal regulation of health care,” Ferretti said. “All are various areas that have exploded in the last years.”

Michael Basile, managing member of the firm, said competition for lawyers has grown because of a proliferation of law school graduates.

“It’s split the tradition of lawyers being aggressively sought after to what is a growing buyers market,” Basile said. “By that, I mean there’s a lot of competition. That translates into becoming better, faster, more cost effective. I don’t think that in years past, the competition and the practice of law went hand in hand. Now, more than ever, the two unite.”

Not only has the number of law school graduates grown but so has the number of female lawyers, said Heather Heiskell Jones, chair of the litigation department.

“When I graduated from law school in 1987, 50 percent of my classmates were women,” she said. “Although it has taken some years, you now see female attorneys in leadership roles within law firms and within corporate America. Female attorneys are strong decision-makers, and Spilman has always been on the cutting-edge in promoting diversity and female leaders.”

Each attorney mentioned that even though they’re proud to celebrate this anniversary, the most important thing is looking to the future.

“For me, personally, celebrating our 150th anniversary as a female in leadership is exciting and rewarding. I have been fortunate in that I have spent my entire career of 27 years with Spilman,” Jones said. “When I started, there were something like 33 attorneys in only one office in the state, Charleston. Today we are over 130 attorneys in four states with seven offices. Our clients are responsible for this growth, and it is a privilege to represent them.”

Basile said there will be continued regional diversification beyond the state’s borders. He also said technology will come into play, saying physical business locations will become fewer.

“We can have a virtual presence beyond the building,” he said. “We have skimmed that Spilman in a box where you wire the heck out of a lawyer’s home office and allow them to practice flexibly. I think you will see more and more of that kind of virtual practice budding throughout and beyond.”

Iskra said expansion has been client driven and strategic. He said the firm will continue to prioritize clients and hire the right people for the right spots.

“Some like to grow for growth’s sake but we’re not one of those firms,” he said. “It’s based on client needs and if the need develops, it will be right for consideration.”

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