

Detroit Native Heads one of Chicago's Top IP Firms

By Kurt Anthony Krug

Legal News

March 23, 2012 - Two months into his new position as president of Brinks Hofer Gilson & Lione, one of the Midwest's premier intellectual law firms based in Chicago, James Sobieraj has learned there is no such thing as a typical day. "Half my time is split between practicing law and the other half is split presiding over the firm – studying strategic directives of the firm, working with the board of directors and shareholders to keep everybody on target with our strategic goals," said Sobieraj, a graduate of the University of Michigan Law School. "We have a very good group of professional managers who aren't lawyers – the COO, the CFO, the chief of human resources – and they do a good job of taking care of the administrative functions of the firms, but there are times when I need to be involved in some of those decisions."



Sobieraj, who was the law firm's president-elect in 2011, replaced previous president Gary Ropski, whose term expired at the end of 2011. The board of directors selected him to replace Ropski. There was a smooth transition between the two.

"(Ropski) was very helpful passing on institutional knowledge, and he has been very supportive since he passed the presidency on to me," said the 55-year-old Sobieraj. "We have a very democratic firm governance. Every year all the shareholders get to vote on who will be on the board of directors – I was on the board of directors for the two previous years and several other years since I've been here."

Upon the end of his presidency in 2016, Sobieraj plans to keep practicing law at Brinks Hofer – something Ropski is now doing.

Sobieraj has been at Brinks Hofer for 30 years – his entire professional career. The law firm is the largest IP law firm in the Midwest and one of the biggest IP law firms in the nation. He has three decades of experience in the enforcement, licensing, and procurement of IP rights. He has been lead counsel in many lawsuits involving patent infringement, patent rights ownership, license disputes, misappropriation of trade secrets, trade dress infringement, unfair competition, false advertising, fraud, anti-trust, and breach of contract.

His overall vision for the law firm is "for us to retain and grow our stature as one of the best and largest IP law firms in nation. (I want to) keep our firm focused on the things that we've done very well over the years, which revolves around helping our clients achieve their business and IP objectives."

A native of Detroit, Sobieraj graduated magna cum laude from the University of Michigan in 1979 with an undergraduate degree in electrical engineering. In 1982, he graduated from U-M Law School with his juris doctorate in law. He lives in Hinsdale, Ill. with his wife of almost 27 years, Jacki, who is a Troy native. They have two daughters: Julia, 21, a junior at The College of William and Mary in Williamsburg, Va.; and Olivia, 18, a senior at Hinsdale Central High School.

“I liked math and science, so I just found the subject matter very interesting and challenging. When I went to (U-M), I actually enrolled in the College of Literature, Science, and the Arts (LS&A). My father was an engineer at General Motors, so I knew I didn’t want to be an engineer,” he said, laughing. “But when I went to orientation, I signed up for classes I liked: calculus II, physics, chemistry, astronomy, even Spanish. The people I met in these classes were mostly engineers. I actually learned more about engineering, so I realized I’d like the engineering curriculum better than the LS&A curriculum,” recalled Sobieraj.

Upon graduation, Sobieraj went directly to law school, turning down what he called “some very nice offers” to work as an engineer in industry.

“I thought long and hard about it, working for a couple of years then going to law school because law school was always my long-range plan. But what it came down to: If my long-range goal was to go to law school, why wait? I decided to go directly there, get my law degree, and move on,” he said.

Asked what inspired him to become a lawyer, Sobieraj has no concrete answer.

“That’s a good question. It’s something that always interested me. There were lawyers I knew growing up. From what I’ve heard about law, I always liked the competitive part of being a lawyer, particularly being a litigator. I grew up watching ‘Perry Mason,’” he said with a laugh. “I was always attracted to the courtroom setting. It’s hard to describe. Why do you fall in love with someone? There are a lot of reasons; there are intangibles as well. I liked the greater sense of professional independence a lot of lawyers seem to have.”

So far, the greatest challenge of his job has been time management.

“There’s so much I’d like to do, but only so many hours in the day. I’m doing my best to take care of clients and take care of the firm. Both demands are important, and I need to make sure I set the right priorities,” he explained.

Despite the demands of his jobs, Sobieraj feels very blessed.

“I’m president of the best IP law firm in country. I have great partners, great colleagues, great clients – I really like the people I work with. I’ve never had a day when I didn’t wake up and dislike going to the office. I know it sounds cliché, but it’s true. I really like the work – we have great clients, I love the people I work with. They’re good people; we work well as a team, and there’s a great deal of satisfaction with that,” he said. “I’m really content doing what I’m doing. I’ve had offers to do other things, but I found my place. This is the right place to stay for the indefinite future.”