

Jeri Baran

Employment Lawyer Likes Challenges of Each Side of the Aisle

by Daniel I. Dorfman

When Jeralyn H. Baran introduces herself, she may present a homemade cupcake and a magnet that reads, “Can We Fire Them?” At first those might seem like polar opposite messages, but the reality is they reflect the talents and abilities of a charming, tough but well-grounded attorney.

Baran is a principal at **Chuhak & Tecson, P.C.** and practices commercial litigation and employment law, representing both management and employees.

“I like the idea of coming up with new theories or ways to present a position,” Baran says. “When you are getting ready to go to trial, it is like a stage production. You are picking your actors, themes and settings. For me, it really is a production that needs to be directed appropriately.

“Working with a theme from the very beginning, you determine who is going to say what and how you are going to get this done. The most exciting part is bringing it all together to make it interesting.”

Born in Waukesha, Wisc., Baran graduated *magna cum laude* from Marquette University. Armed with a bachelor’s in history and political science, she contemplated applying to law school.

“I didn’t understand all the complexities involved in being a skilled attorney” Baran says, “but I knew I wanted to be part of a profession that would allow me to perform mental gymnastics to keep my brain active, one that would require me to continue to learn and, at the very heart, one that actually helped people in solving their problems.”

But first, however, Baran chose to get her master’s in American history — also at Marquette. Subsequently, she moved to Champaign with her husband who was working on his graduate degree. She took a job before starting law school with a local general practitioner, John Phipps. Working as his office manager, she got a close-up view of the practice of law, which decided her career choice.

“I wanted to dedicate my energies to work that interested me, so I elected to get my law degree,” Baran says. “I really love learning so it was an easy decision for me to go for another degree.”

Receiving a scholarship to the University of Illinois College of Law, Baran was determined to challenge herself and was always one to ask the professors a lot of questions.

(Continued on page 166)



(Continued from page 164)

“It fit my personality to continually push,” Baran says, and her desire to learn led to an extraordinary academic career. She earned entry into the prestigious Order of the Coif, which was impressive to potential recruiters, and graduated seventh in her class.

Many of Chicago’s top firms liked Baran and what she had achieved. She eventually accepted an offer from Jenner & Block and was quickly placed in a litigation cluster largely focused on a top Jenner client.

“I found a very good home at Jenner,” Baran says. “I loved the work I did there, and the people there were incredibly smart and motivated.”

Jenner normally did not handle products liability work, but they offered opportunities at the time for more junior lawyers to do so. With her energy and desire to learn, Baran easily accepted that challenge, which led to one of her first big assignments — defending a blood bank in matters involving the transmission of HIV antibodies.

“I got to try products cases at Jenner, which was a little bit unusual for my class,” Baran says. “It was a great experience, and I ended up bypassing document review and other more tedious work that many junior associates typically do.”

In addition, Baran also worked with Jenner’s employment law group and started traveling to plants to see firsthand, among other things, how products were made. These tours were eye-opening to Baran who, to this day, when she is retained for her for employment law services, requests a tour to see the company’s operations.

“I love to see how the product is created,” Baran says. “You learn so much by watching the process and can gain a much deeper understanding of the employer and its relationship with its employees.”

Time for a New Home

Baran practiced at Jenner for six years, but then she and her husband decided to start a family. She was concerned about balancing the roles of lawyer and mother, as her workload was tremendous.

“At Jenner the work was very interesting and the people were very smart,” Baran says. “It was a wonderful world for me to be in, but I also wanted to be a mom. I decided I needed to cut back on the work — just slightly — so I could raise my son.”

In 1996, Baran joined Chuhak & Tecson, which worked with her vision of balancing work and family.

“Leaving Jenner was hard,” she says, “but the tradeoff in work-life balance was worth it.”

At the time Chuhak was a young firm, looking to pump up its employment law division.

“Because of my credentials, they really couldn’t pass me up,” Baran says. “But

what Chuhak offered me and what I was never offered before was the opportunity to become a full lawyer, to learn how to market and understand the practice of law outside of the ivory tower, to really understand my clients, and to recognize how expensive legal services are and how to work within that framework. It is a big mind change to go from a large firm to a smaller firm.”

One of the attorneys that recruited her to Chuhak & Tecson was Alan Dolinko, who today is a shareholder at Robinson Curley & Clayton.

“Jeri just wanted to learn and work with as many people as possible,” Dolinko says. “She knew she wasn’t a finished product at the time and so she wanted to collaborate with as many lawyers as she could, allowing her to see different lawyers in different situations. She wanted a lot of responsibility early on and she demonstrated that she could handle larger client matters with a minimum of supervision.”

As her career has evolved at Chuhak & Tecson, Baran continues her employment work and also practices in its litigation group where she says she gets to present at least “one good trial a year.”

Her career highlights have piled up including juries who have awarded Baran’s clients verdicts north of \$1 million in situations involving breaches of contract in cases before both the state and federal courts.

In employment law, Baran works both sides of the aisle. Baran could represent a client who believes she or he was a victim of discrimination by the company or an executive seeking top compensation while simultaneously assisting another client in any number of matters ranging from ERISA or OSHA compliance, providing training, revising policies or suggesting how to handle a staff reduction if the company’s executives believe one is necessary for either financial or performance reasons.

“I really can’t involve myself in whether it is the right decision or the wrong decision,” Baran says of employee restructuring or discharges. “That is a business decision. But I explain whether it was defensible or what the risks are and question if it is a risk they are willing to accept or whether it was one they are not prepared to accept.”

Many of Baran’s clients include not-for-profit entities, including the Lutheran Life Communities in the northwest suburbs. She has worked with Lutheran Life for 10 years and has provided analysis in many employment matters, including restructuring.

“Many times people look at us and say that because we are a ministry we can’t terminate someone because we are not being ministry-focused, said Roger Paulsberg, Lutheran Life’s CEO. But Jeri has helped our HR people and front-line managers realize that you are a good steward of the ministry when

you make the tough decisions and help someone find other employment.”

Another client Baran has helped is Clarke Mosquito Control Products, Inc. One of their top executives remembered a time when Baran’s talents and perspective came through very well as the clock was ticking toward a court appearance where no one knew what the outcome would be.

“On the steps of the courthouse when we were about to go into the final stages of litigation, she counseled me on a solution that she believed would be a win for everyone, including the opposition,” recalls Kevin Magro, the company’s executive vice president. “By doing so she was able to bring the dispute to a close, resulting in meeting our objectives without compromising our position. She is very good at that.”

Baran’s efforts have paid off within Chuhak & Tecson as she was the first woman named a principal of the 65-attorney firm and also was its first ombudsman. She has served on the management committee, was the chair of the operations committee, is presently an active member of the litigation committee and heads the firm’s employment law practice group. She also is a certified mediator.

Advocating for Women

Although Baran does not believe she has encountered any seriously overt discrimination due to her gender, she has heard her share of “honeys” and “sweeties.”

Baran wants to see women lawyers succeed and works diligently to mentor the women associates at Chuhak & Tecson. Baran is one of the founding members of Women Helping Women, a program hosted biannually by the women attorneys of Chuhak & Tecson that allows women professionals to network to accomplish business development and charitable service simultaneously. She recognizes that women often network differently than men and finds that this program allows them to leverage a desire to do good work in the community with networking.

“I know we have helped a lot of people served by the community service organizations we partner with, and I also know we have grown business for our firm and our clients,” says Baran.

Outside of the office, Baran has helped raise money for Chicago’s Young Women’s Leadership Charter School and has promoted manufacturing as a career choice for women as a member of the Women in TMA Committee of the Tooling and Manufacturing Association.

“I really feel I have something to say, and I have found a balance,” Baran says. “I do feel I have been able to be a good mother and an excellent attorney and to be a mentor to attorneys on their way up.”

(Continued on page 373)

BARAN

(Continued from page 166)

Away from her professional responsibilities, Baran's home-baked cupcakes have come along with her love of "Cupcake Wars" on the Food Network.

She and her husband, David, live in Wilmette. They have two children, Ben, a freshman at the University of Wisconsin, and Abbi, who is in eighth grade. Her interests include figure skating, skiing, theater and of course, baking cupcakes.

Baran appeared before a zoning commission in Arlington Heights in a recent case and found the process intriguing. Ever the learner and with her children getting older, she is looking to get involved in public service and has expressed interest in joining a board or a commission in Wilmette.

With her career going well, Baran believes she brings a lot to the client, no matter the situation.

"I am very compassionate, and I am also very smart," she says. "I have the ability to understand what the client is asking. But I try to get deeper into what is motivating them. I work to help them understand they are being heard. Part of that comes from being a parent. You try to guide and counsel and, because of this, I know I have a good foundation." ■