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Patterson finds patent for success

BY CRAIG DIRKES
STAFF WRITER

For Jim Patterson to open his own intellectual property law firm in 1991, it took serious grit.

It meant leaving the global superpower Dorsey & Whitney, the law firm for which he had worked eight years. To boot, he had become a Dorsey partner in 1990.

Would the Goliath firm crush its new, financially undersized foe?

Far from it.

“Dorsey was my first client,” said Patterson, founding partner of Minneapolis-based Patterson, Thuente, Skaar & Christensen. He added that his former Dorsey colleague, Gene Johnson, “thought I was going to starve to death, and sent me over a [patent] case to do.

“I’m proud of that. It’s a small town — too small to be taking advantage of your friends.”

That first patent case helped lay the foundation for what is today a 33-attorney, full-service IP firm, employing 70, with offices in Minneapolis and Atlanta. Its practice areas include patent prosecution; copyright, trademark and trade secrets; entertainment and the arts; intellectual property litigation; licensing; and international law.

Patterson received an engineering degree in 1972 from the United States Naval Academy, and is a 1981 graduate of the University of Kansas Law School.

Following his education, Patterson didn’t know which area of law he wanted to focus on. But his engineering background afforded him a viable option: The U.S. Patent Office requires patent attorneys to have an undergraduate degree in science or engineering, or an equivalent in class work.

He soon applied for a patent attorney job with the U.S. Navy.

“Ten minutes into the interview they offered me a job,” Patterson recalled. Although he didn’t accept the position, the experience did spark an idea. “I thought, ‘Hmm. I should probably look into this.’ I did and found there was a lot of opportunity in intellectual property law.”

Opportunity indeed. Patterson’s firm’s annual billings, attorney salaries and partner profits are “up there with the big boys,” he said, declining to give any specifics.

That’s not to say the White Bear Lake native measures success in dollars.

“Lawyering is a service profession, and I don’t think you can commoditize service,” Patterson said. “You have to be a good lawyer just to come to the table in this town. So, how you distinguish yourself is to service the heck out of your clients and give them good value. That’s what you strive for.”

Patterson’s firm serves a broad range of clients — emerging businesses, established companies, individual inventors, publicly held corporations and more. He said he most enjoys patenting ideas that are twists on everyday products. Right now,



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his firm is representing a diaper company with such an idea.

“There are over 600 active patents in the diaper industry,” he said. “To come up with a new innovation [on an existing product], to compete and to try and weave your way through that thicket is much harder lawyering, even though the technology isn’t that difficult. If you come to me and you have the cure for cancer, any moron can get a patent on that. Lawyering on simple technology is, to me, far more challenging and, therefore, more interesting.”

Pro bono work also excites Patterson. He and former Naval Academy classmate Bob Cattanaach, now senior trial partner at Dorsey, recently represented the Lake Washburn Association (LWA) in a land dispute in north central Minnesota’s Cass County. Patterson said he and Cattanaach stopped a developer from subdividing a dormant lake resort into 32 lots, which they argued would negatively impact nearby walleye spawning beds.

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Education: Engineering degree, United States Naval Academy; University of Kansas Law School graduate

Age: 55

Family: Wife, Landi; children Jeni, 29; Jamie, 28; John, 25; James, 21

Hobbies: Marathon running

Profile

Jim Patterson

Partner,
Patterson, Thuente, Skaar &
Christensen, since 1991

“We basically got it arranged so the developer backed out, and the former co-owner of the resort was able to buy it back,” Patterson said. “I’ve always felt a good part of this profession is giving something back. It’s something I’ve always been very committed to and believe in strongly.”

The same goes for Cattanaach, who had wanted to work with Patterson ever since their college days. Cattanaach said he had just finished a separate pro bono case when the LWA case arose, and Patterson was the perfect partner.

“This was the first real opportunity to combine our skill sets,” Cattanaach said. “Jim is an extraordinary lawyer for one simple reason: leadership. He’s not only one of the most intelligent and ethical people I know, he exudes those characteristics in a way that inspires others to embrace them as the cornerstone of their professional practice.”

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