



SPOTLIGHTS

10 Years Later: Barnes & Thornburg Making Its Mark In Columbus

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It opened during the depths of the Great Recession, when most businesses were running scared. Barnes & Thornburg, however, stuck to its plan of opening four offices that year. Columbus was one of them and the move had paid off with steady growth fueled by top talent, a focus on collegiality, and an outsized community presence.

A decade later, Barnes & Thornburg's Columbus office has gone from two lawyers to 24 and to a modern office high above downtown Columbus. Bill Nolan, Columbus managing partner who helped establish the firm's presence in Columbus, and Kelly Atkinson, office administrator and the firm's diversity and inclusion coordinator, recently discussed the last 10 years, the challenges of opening a law office, and what's to come.

What have been the watershed moments in Columbus?

BN: Opening the office, especially because of when we opened it, stands out. Columbus was one of four offices Barnes & Thornburg opened in 2009, and the firm stuck with that plan despite the economic crisis. That set a tone of entrepreneurialism and confidence.

Three years later, we moved into our current office space on the 33rd floor of the Huntington Center, the premier office building in Columbus. The views and the openness of the space have become a defining aspect of who we are. We have made our space a community space, too, offering it to clients, nonprofits, and other friends for their meetings and events.

Lastly, while we have steadily grown, our biggest single step was the

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addition of the real estate group from my old firm joining us in 2014 – eight lawyers, two paralegals and two legal administrative assistants. That gave us a new level of critical mass.

KA: Another moment that comes to mind is when we decided to sponsor the Women’s Fund of Central Ohio’s Gender By Us Toolkit in late 2016. That marked the beginning of our intense focus on diversity and inclusion, especially in the Columbus legal market. We of course always cared about creating an inclusive culture for our talent, but this was the point at which we started to become known for a commitment to it outside of the firm as well. It’s been an honor to be a part of creating such an invaluable reputation in our community.

How has the office changed?

BN: In 2009, we were a classic startup, originally planned to be a “labor and employment outpost.” Now, mostly one and two lawyers at a time, we’ve become a full-service office with many high-profile and established lawyers. To give just one recent example, in 2020, three of our lawyers were recognized as Best Lawyers’ Lawyers of the Year. That’s a high percentage!

We also have a diversity of age and experience levels, giving us both prominent senior practitioners and a strong foundation for growth. For example, there has been a new partner who has grown through the ranks each of the last three years. (I also have to mention that we have zero partner departures, which is almost unheard of for a growing office.)

On the business services support side, we’ve developed a more flexible staffing model, relying less on traditional law firm titles and roles and enabling us to move people from entry-level positions into spots that suit their strengths and interests. We get so many compliments internally and externally on our team, and it never gets old.

For an office our size, we have a big community profile. David Paragas was Board Chair of the United Way of Central Ohio. Katrina Thompson has been President of the Women Lawyers of Franklin County. Kelly Atkinson is about to be Vice Chair of the Columbus Metropolitan Club. I am Chair of the Columbus Bar Association Managing Partners’ Diversity Initiative. Just to name a few. Inclusion and diversity efforts have been a big part of our profile as well, and we have been recognized for those efforts.

KA: We’ve become better and better at identifying each person’s strengths and aligning those with the office’s needs. We genuinely care about our colleagues and we all know each other well enough to ensure that individual needs are being met while also realizing our full potential at work. I’m very proud to work for a firm that values not only individuals for what they contribute, but also for who they are.

How do you see the office – and Central Ohio – evolving in the coming years?

BN: I expect continued steady growth while advancing our leadership in the areas of innovation, diversity and inclusion in the Columbus market. I also see our associates and younger partners taking on greater firm and

community leadership roles and moving the office in a positive direction, and continued strength and innovation from our great business services team.

I'm bullish on our growth because of the strength of our firm and the vibrancy of the Central Ohio market. There's hardly a list of "best" or "fastest" cities that doesn't include Columbus these days. It's always been a great place to live with a strong economy, a great quality of life, and an unsurpassed spirit of collaboration, but somewhere in the last decade the rest of the world started noticing.

We have a broad-based economy, which is the main reason the region has continued to thrive while other parts of the Midwest have struggled. And whether it's adding significant capabilities in areas such as real estate, government services, business litigation, creditors' rights, healthcare, or workers' compensation over the years – I'm proud of how our office has grown up right alongside Columbus over the past 10 years. Columbus is a great fit for Barnes & Thornburg.

KA: As Bill mentioned, Columbus is a pretty amazing place to be, and we intend to take full advantage of that energy. We will undoubtedly continue to align our values with others in the community who share our love of relationships and integrity in business. I'm excited to see where that takes us as more people recognize this office's authenticity. It's an honor to help the firm push forward in Columbus and across the country.