Alumnus Enjoys Successful Practice in Civil Litigation

FIRM: WATSON & RENNER, Washington, D.C.

ATTORNEYS: Tom Watson, JD ’72, with Curtis Renner

PRIMARY AREAS OF PRACTICE: Civil Litigation and Trials

YEAR FOUNDED: 1995

BRIEF BACKGROUND:
Tom Watson: The types of cases we have handled have varied widely, including toxic tort defense, contracts, real property, and professional liability of lawyers and scientists. Our clients have been in a variety of industries and mostly have been large companies. Most of our work is on the defense side. We have had a number of jury trials in state and federal courts around the country. We have also handled many Daubert and Frye hearings on the admissibility of scientific or technical expert testimony. Additionally, we are proud of the significant resources we have devoted to pro bono work.

Q: Why did you choose to practice in a small firm?

A: For 22 years, I practiced in two large firms, Crowell & Moring and Morgan Lewis. They are great firms with excellent lawyers, and I enjoyed those years immensely. We started our small firm for several reasons, including just to do something different; firm economics that would allow us to do more case work and less supervision of others; fewer conflicts that would prevent us from taking interesting cases; the ability to more quickly adopt the latest and best technology into our practice; and, perhaps, most of all, just to see if we could do it.

Q: Do you feel that your firm size is a plus, a minus, or a nonfactor in your practice?

A: It has been a plus. Many of our cases come from long-standing clients or referrals from them. We also get a lot of cases referred from other lawyers, usually at large or medium-sized firms, who will send a regular client to us for a single case due to a conflict with another client. We do not take additional cases from a referred client. We also do not try to compete for clients with big firms. Our approach seems to lead to referrals of some very interesting cases.

Q: Why did you choose your particular area of practice?

A: During law school I clerked for Lou Gilden, an excellent trial lawyer, and after law school I clerked for Judge William Webster in the Eastern District. After those great experiences, I had no doubt that I wanted to do civil litigation and trial work.

Q: How has your area of law changed since you began practicing?

A: Discovery has become more intense. Effective use of electronic technology has become almost essential in litigation and trials. When we started our firm, we adopted the policy that whenever possible and economically feasible, we would use computers instead of paper and more employees. That has provided a significant strategic and economic advantage to a small firm like ours.

Q: What has been the most rewarding aspect of your practice?

A: Most rewarding has been the opportunity to work with (or oppose) some excellent lawyers and appear before some great judges. We are also proud of our successful defense of AT&T against a claim that use of a cell phone caused a physician’s ultimately fatal brain cancer (we are now representing AT&T in similar cases); of a recipient of the Nobel Prize in Medicine against a claim of scientific fraud; and of a pioneering AIDS researcher against a claim of scientific fraud. We are especially proud of our representation of a young man who was mentally disabled as a result of an unprovoked assault by security guards and of the substantial jury verdict we obtained for him against a large organization.