

2009 Volunteer of the Year

Melissa Proffitt Reese



By Candace Gwaltney

Family portraits line the shelves and colorful crayon drawings adorn the walls. Mementos from trade missions abroad decorate a bookcase. A stack of today's work dominates the desk. Welcome to the office (and life) of Melissa Proffitt Reese, a partner with Ice Miller in downtown Indianapolis.

Reese successfully balances a busy employee benefits practice, various community and economic development involvements, and a family life. It's a feat that she says takes "a lot of energy and organization."

Growing up the daughter of a lawyer and a judge, Reese knew at an early age she wanted to study law or medicine. Her father, who Reese describes as her greatest mentor, encouraged her as a child not to limit herself.

"I can remember when I was in junior high and he asked me, 'Honey, now what do you want to do when you get older?'" Reese recalls. She told him she wanted to be a nurse or a paralegal. "He just looked at me and said, 'Now why in the world wouldn't you be a doctor or a lawyer?'"

It's that same lesson Reese instills in her children through the way she leads her life. "I think it's also very important to set role models for young women," she notes. "I have two daughters of my own (and a son); they know, if they want to, they can do it all. They can be a good mother and a good wife and have a really nice, strong family unit, but also have a professional career if that's what they choose."

In September, Melissa Proffitt Reese traveled to Japan and China as part of a trade mission delegation led by Gov. Mitch Daniels.

Clear connection

Reese's law practice focuses primarily on employee benefits. She represents mostly large, international companies, assisting them in setting up their benefit plans to ensure they are compliant with all laws and regulations. A niche area that developed for Reese is representing General Motors spinoffs that became independent companies.

More recently, Reese has led Ice Miller in establishing its agribusiness initiative. The focus allows the firm to achieve an in-depth understanding of the industry to provide better counsel. Reese chairs the effort that is now two years old.

She developed an interest in and understanding of agribusiness while traveling on trade missions with the governor and lieutenant governor. "I realized how important agriculture is to Indiana and that there really wasn't a law firm that had focused on this industry," she comments. "It really has been a heavy focus by this current (state) administration, and (I thought) why not develop a practice specifically for the industry."

Reese was invited to participate in Gov. Mitch Daniels' first trade mission to Japan in 2005; she since has been on every trip led by the governor and Lt. Gov. Becky Skillman. In September,

Reese was a part of the statewide delegation to China and Japan. She also went on a trade mission to Brazil with Indianapolis Mayor Greg Ballard in July.

"I'm a huge proponent of these trade missions. I think they are very important for our state for a couple different reasons – and all having to do with economic development," Reese asserts. These trips are used to convince foreign companies that "Indiana is a great place to do business, for them to locate a facility and their employees, and also to highlight our educational institutions."

She says the hidden gem of these trips is the interactions among members of the delegation. "It's an incredible networking opportunity for people in our community to get to know and



understand other businesses, how we impact each other and common problems and solutions that can be developed.”

Networking extraordinaire

Reese’s keen networking abilities (a skill she uses during those trade missions) have aided the Indiana Chamber as well.

“Melissa’s strongest quality, like many business people, is her ability to be very connected,” notes Jennifer Elkin, Indiana Chamber senior vice president of marketing. “She takes that talent and applies it in ways that help others succeed. She has taken such an interest in the Chamber that she has worked to make those connections work for the Chamber.”

Reese goes well beyond making the introductions. “She’s been there to make sure those relationships form successfully.”

Indiana Chamber Membership Manager Brett Carrington recalls several times when Reese set up meetings with prospective members to discuss the merits of joining the Chamber. Those companies soon made their Chamber investment and began realizing the benefits, he remarks.

When one company Reese already worked with indicated that it wasn’t sure about the value the Chamber provided, Reese spoke to her company contact directly and shared the significance she sees, Carrington relates.

“Melissa is always willing to help; even when she did not have a direct relationship with a particular non-member I was asking about, she was happy to investigate and find out which



Reese meets with an Ice Miller colleague in her office; her practice focuses on employee benefits.

Ice Miller colleague did have that direct correlation,” Carrington shares.

Reese joined the Chamber board of directors in 2007 and serves on the employment law policy committee.

She says she has enjoyed talking to businesses about the value of the Chamber. She points to the legislative efforts as well as the Chamber’s role as a resource for training and updates.

“There’s a constant flow of pertinent information that is very timely through the magazine, the newsletters, e-alerts and through Twitter. (It’s) just constantly educating the business community as to issues that they need to be concerned about.”

She concludes, “I think the Chamber is a phenomenal organization. There are a lot of specific items that it brings to the table, but most importantly I think it does a phenomenal job of representing the very diverse needs of businesses throughout the state.”

Kirby Risk

1815 Sagamore Parkway North
Lafayette, IN 47904
Phone: 765/448-4567
Fax: 765/447-3621
www.kirbyrisk.com

Electrical Supply • Service Center • Mechanical Solutions and Service • Precision Machining

Kirby Risk is a relationship-driven company focused on the customer. We listen carefully to customer needs and develop a *value proposition* designed around those needs.



We deliver our *value proposition* of superior products, services, and business processes by people dedicated to serving the needs of our customers.

Kirby Risk is unique in its ability to “Put the Pieces Together” for our customers and offer one stop shopping for a wide variety of quality products and services.



We Put the Pieces Together

Since 1926

**KIRBY RISK IS PROUD TO BE A 50+ YEAR
MEMBER OF THE INDIANA CHAMBER**