

# Ogletree Deakins

## A Case for Transparency, Teamwork

By Symone C. Skrzycki

**W**ant to know a secret when it comes to cultivating a winning workplace culture? Never underestimate the power of food. Just ask Todd Kaiser, a shareholder at Ogletree, Deakins, Nash, Smoak & Stewart, P.C., one of the nation's largest labor and employment law firms. Fifty associates are part of the team at the downtown Indianapolis office.

"Our kitchen is an atmosphere where you can talk, take a step back from work and have a little fun," he observes with a laugh. "We have food all the time. People bring in cakes and cookies and cupcakes. There's always a race to the kitchen."

But delicious cuisine and desserts aren't the only ingredients that create camaraderie and bring employees together at the firm. Several other elements are part of the mix.

"It's a very open culture," Kaiser reveals. "I think the only complaint I hear is that we share too much information, which is good; it makes us transparent. People know where we're going. They know the goals. There are no hidden agendas."

"Two, we practice what we preach. We're a firm that provides advice and counsel to employers on how to take care of their workforce – with mutual respect and treating everyone as equals. Everyone's job is important."

### Lightening the load

Employees take pride in the firm's commitment to making a difference through volunteerism.

"We want to be a part of the community – not just take, but give back as well," Kaiser stresses. "Giving back and being involved in your community makes for a good work environment."

For the office's 2012 Christmas Giving program, employees made care baskets for families at Coburn Place Safe Haven, a shelter for women and children suffering from domestic violence. Additional philanthropic efforts have focused on Hurricane Sandy relief, orphan centers, Hoosier tornado victims, food drives and more.

"I'm amazed by the support everyone gives and the fun they have doing it," reflects paralegal Tracy Mounts.

That generosity extends to life within the firm.

Senior management gives back to employees in a variety of ways. Examples include zoo outings, "Santa Claus Comes to Ogletree" (managing shareholder Kim Ebert and his wife dress up as Mr. and Mrs. Claus), monthly birthday celebrations (complete with cake, casseroles and other goodies) and Christmas bonuses.

"On staff appreciation day, the attorneys have a cook-off and bring in their favorite dish. They serve us and we vote on it," remarks legal secretary Diana Miller. "They win a special apron that's handed down."

And did we mention the ugly sweater contest?

"That gets heated!" exclaims associate Brett Buhl. "It seems like everyone participates. I've seen some crazy sweaters." Last year's winning sweater was adorned with lights and a battery pack.

Kaiser explains why creating a sense of fun and family is so important.

"Work is only a small part of everyone's lives – there's no reason that work can't be fun," he declares. "When you get to know people outside the office, it makes for a better work life. You get to know how their kids are doing, what sports they play. When you see them go from two months (old) to high school,

Ogletree Deakins' annual Christmas giving project collected 98 toys and gifts for children in 2011.



The firm's wellness room provides a private setting for staff to reboot. A massage therapist visits biweekly.

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it's neat to share that with your friends.”

It also fosters teamwork.

“Nothing can be accomplished without every single person executing their role on this team,” Kaiser comments. “That’s how we treat people – they’re a very important part of the team.”

Buhl says there is no place he would rather be.

“Over the seven years I’ve worked here, I’ve had a lot of opportunities to go elsewhere and it’s never crossed my mind,” he emphasizes. “I couldn’t imagine being with another group of people.”

Miller sums it up: “They care so much about us as individuals and our needs.”