

MELISSA PROFFITT REESE

Volunteer of the Year

By Rebecca Patrick

Melissa Proffitt Reese subscribes to the notion that chaos can be a good thing. In fact, “welcome chaos” is how she describes her workdays.

Reese is a partner at Ice Miller and leads efforts in the agribusiness, employee benefits and energy groups.

Her schedule features “meeting after meeting, place after place – in and out of the office. It’s a real mixture of client work and board work.”

Reese appreciates that the firm has made it a point to encourage its lawyers to give back. For her, that has translated to essentially having two full-time jobs. And she “loves that” and thrives on the fast pace.

“I like the high energy and moving around. If I was in my office all day long drafting documents, I really wouldn’t be very happy with that kind of existence. I meet very different people, especially people outside of the legal field when I do my board work (organizations that focus on economic development and women’s issues are high on her activity list).

“It’s been an excellent mix of the two. I’ve been really happy that community service benefits the firm and it dovetails together,” she explains.

Setting a good example

Reese credits two people in particular for being role models regarding volunteer service. In her professional life, it was her mentor at Ice Miller, Jim Cunning. Overall, it was her father.

“He is a lawyer by trade and was managing partner for his law firm for 35 years, but at the same time was very, very active in the community and politics.

“So I grew up watching him manage all of those things very seamlessly and he genuinely enjoyed it. It wasn’t an obligation or a commitment; it was part of his daily living. Without question, he’s the one who generally inspired me along those lines,” she offers.

Her philosophy on volunteering is straightforward: It’s something everyone should do at some stage in life.

“At whatever point that’s right for you, I think it’s important to serve as a role model to your children and others in the community through volunteering efforts.

“You’ve received or someone has always received help from someone who has supported them. So then to give back in that way is really fun,” she adds.

A member of the Indiana Chamber of Commerce board for six years, Reese continues to

At a recent Ice Miller event in downtown Indianapolis, Reese provided insights about the federal health care law and what employers can expect.





Reese says the employee benefits arena has been overtaken by the complicated – 31,000 pages and counting – Affordable Care Act.

share her knowledge on several of the organization’s policy committees as well as its political action group, Indiana Business for Responsive Government.

Reese is often called upon to be a bridge to potential member companies.

“Melissa has been extremely important to our membership development efforts in recent years. She has generated numerous leads, written letters and made calls for us to help us connect with employers throughout the state,” praises Tim Brewer, Indiana Chamber vice president of membership.

“She is absolutely a difference-maker in the Indiana business community, and we are very fortunate to have her contributions.”

This envoy role is one Reese finds particularly satisfying.

“I’ve really enjoyed interacting with other business leaders and letting them know what the Chamber has to offer. And when they do join the organization, it’s really rewarding to see those business leaders interacting with each other and talking about issues and concerns they share, and trying to solve those.”

The game-changer

In the last few years, Reese has shifted her focus to help the Indiana Chamber and countless companies navigate the complex federal health care law.

“I would say right now about 80% of what I do is on Obamacare. The other parts of the benefits world haven’t gone away; it’s just that the Affordable Care Act is requiring that much focus now.”

She notes it’s the biggest piece of legislation ever in the benefits area and the regulations (thus far) are two and a half times longer than the *Bible*.

“It’s been a game-changer for our practice group at Ice Miller and all the employers out there, especially small- to medium-size employers. It’s really a challenge for them to comply with all the requirements,” she asserts.

Indiana Chamber President and CEO Kevin Brinegar says

Reese’s expertise and guidance on the matter have been invaluable to the organization.

“That’s both in terms of our health insurance for our own employees and particularly with regard to our ChamberCare (health coverage) program for our members. She has invested hours and hours of her time helping us sort through the morass of the Affordable Care Act. We are very grateful and have been very well served by her assistance and leadership.”

Reese readily acknowledges the effort and “years of absolute frustration” it took learning the law but also admits “it’s really a lot of fun once you get into it and once it starts to click and coordinate. It’s fun to learn new areas.”

Current passions

In any spare moments she may have, Reese likes to spend time with her three children. She also loves being among friends in a variety of settings. And in the last five years or so, she has discovered a passion for golf: “As frustrating of a game as golf can be, I really enjoy playing.”

Regarding her volunteer efforts, Reese is particularly proud of a new board she’s involved with called the Indy Public Safety Foundation (started by the city’s public safety director Troy Riggs). The group, in existence for a little over six months, was created to fund training or items that public safety personnel might need but can’t get through federal, state or local monies. An example is managerial and supervisory training.

“We have this amazing board of outstanding individuals who are committing in-kind service from their companies as well as time and money to support public safety. It’s an example of what I really enjoy doing: Trying to figure out how we can put either government or public servants together with business and help each other – and not be in silos,” she states.

“Figuring out how to get individuals in our community together to try to make Indianapolis a better place is my very favorite thing to try to accomplish and do.”