

JILL RITCHIE

By Symone C. Skrzycki

Volunteer of the Year

Jill Ritchie is used to being the new kid on the block.

Born in Germany, she traveled throughout the world as a child. Her father was in the military and the family relocated often to places such as Hawaii, Kansas and Boston.

"I went to eight or nine schools before I was even 12," she reveals.

Jill Ritchie describes her time as "busy and amazing" since joining Indiana Beverage (formerly known as North Coast Distributing) this summer in a newly created role. "That's probably the most exciting aspect of the position to me. I'll get to shape the position going forward based on the needs of the companies and our customers," she declares.



Indiana Beverage Chief Executive Officer Bruce Leetz started working for the company in the 1960s. "He's built something wonderful here," Ritchie states.

That shaped her ability to adapt – and thrive – in career and community endeavors.

Ritchie recently joined Indiana Beverage as vice president and general counsel – with duties in public and governmental affairs. Based in Valparaiso, the beer distributor has 260 employees.

"I've always, since I was really little, been at ease in front of people. My parents would say that being an attorney or an advocate was a natural fit for me because I was always presenting my case to them," she says with a laugh.

Ritchie also has a knack for economic development.

She lends her passion and expertise to regional groups such as the Northwest Indiana Forum, where she is the current chair of the board of directors. In addition, she's served on the Indiana Chamber's board (since 2010) and nominating, energy and taxation policy committees.

Ritchie partnered with the Chamber on its *Indiana Vision 2025* economic development plan when the organization conducted a second round of regional forums in late 2013.

"She helped pull together a large and diverse group of business, community and education leaders to identify opportunities and challenges in Northwest Indiana, and to find common areas of interest where we could work together," comments Chamber president and CEO Kevin Brinegar. "To have those eyes and ears as a regional partner – someone so in tune with Northwest Indiana – is invaluable."

Ritchie adds that the forums and *Indiana Vision 2025* play a crucial role in planning for the state's future.

"Our forum in Northwest Indiana was a great event that allowed people in this region to have a voice on important issues in the state," she remarks.

A taste for making a difference led Ritchie to Indiana Beverage.

"Their corporate citizenship here (in Northwest Indiana) is well known. I think the personal commitment this company shows to its communities will allow me to take the involvement I've already started to the next level," she emphasizes.

Travelin' (wo)man

Ritchie graduated from Indiana University in Bloomington with a public and environmental affairs degree in 1988.

"During my last year of undergrad (school), I started to think that I might go to law school – it was something I had always kind of thought about," she reflects. But she wasn't sure just yet.

"I decided that with the public policy degree,

As a regional partner, Ritchie teamed with the Chamber to bring together key business leaders for the *Indiana Vision 2025* forum in Northwest Indiana.



the best place to find a job if I wasn't going to law school right away would be Washington, D.C. I bartended and saved about \$1,000. I moved to Washington, D.C. to get a job. I had no connections, knew no one and started looking for work."

A stint at an information technology equipment and services company in its government contracting department introduced her to one of many mentors in her life.

"I got to work with the company's legal counsel, a woman named Lorraine. She was the first lawyer I ever met, and was a very interesting and dynamic person," Ritchie remembers fondly. "I started thinking about law school again and decided I would go ahead and go before I got too far along in my career to make that happen."

She headed east and earned a degree from the University of Pittsburgh School of Law. She soon started working at a small law firm in Altoona.

"The beauty of that was that they needed someone who could get out and be an advocate right away. I was doing hearings, depositions and trial work within a week of starting there. That sort of led me to another bigger firm back in Pittsburgh, and I eventually moved there to be in private practice."

When she was approached about a job as a litigation attorney at Pittsburgh-headquartered United States Steel Corporation (commonly known as U.S. Steel), she eagerly accepted in 2001.

"I had liked working for a corporation," she notes, referring to her first job in D.C., "and always thought at some point I would end up back at a corporation in my career."

"I had always represented employers in my positions. My background and experience had been all about (serving) the needs of employers."

In 2008 – 20 years after graduating from IU – Ritchie returned to Indiana to make the state her home.

She relocated to Northwest Indiana for a role in U.S. Steel's governmental affairs division.

"I was covering, for the company, Indiana, Illinois and Michigan. By moving to Northwest Indiana, I was better able to get to all three state capitals and give the work the attention it needed," she explains.

"I jumped into the Northwest Indiana community and began to do a number of different things."

Among the most prominent activities is her leadership with the Northwest Indiana Forum, which represents a seven-county area.

"It's a catalyst for initiatives that promote economic development. That helps to create and retain quality jobs. It's all about family-sustaining jobs," Ritchie contends.

Staying connected

Collaborating with the Chamber in a variety of ways helps Ritchie keep Northwest Indiana linked in to the rest of the state.

"Organizations like the Indiana Chamber are really important because they create a policy environment that allows businesses to succeed," she declares. "The key to businesses' success is providing family-sustaining jobs and the Chamber creates an environment in which that can occur."

"I love being a member of the board of directors (for example). The meetings provide a great opportunity to shape the policies that will advance the interests of Indiana residents and Indiana companies."

When asked about her proudest on-the-job moments, Ritchie pauses.

"It always feels good to win a case if you're an attorney. Or if you're a government affairs person, to pass legislation

to help your company in being successful. But one of the things I've enjoyed the most was in the last several years (when) I hosted club members from the Gary Boys & Girls Club in Indianapolis at the Statehouse."

The day brings together a group of about 10 members (ranging in age from eight to 14) to attend the black caucus prayer breakfast, tour the Statehouse, eat lunch with the legislators who represent them and watch the General Assembly in action.

"That's been a very rewarding activity for me because I've been able to share the legislative process with these students and show them how things work at the capital," she emphasizes. "Everything they learn in school becomes real to them that day."

Close to home

Ritchie didn't have to look far as a child for role models when it came to giving back. She learned about the importance of service from her military father and her mother, an ordained deacon in the Episcopal Church.

But other sources of inspiration were yet to come.

"There's a long list at every stage of my life where I've looked around and learned from people," she muses. "I hope that will continue forever for me."

Nature also inspires Ritchie.

"I like to bike," she shares. "We live right near a Rails to Trail trail, and every time I ride on it – this may be the nerd in me – but I know that somebody had to have a vision to turn that old railroad track into a trail, and someone had to get the funding to construct it and maintain it. It's pretty awesome."