

Stephanie A. Smithey



IN LOVE WITH LEARNING AND TEACHING

By Symone C. Skrzycki

Stephanie Smithey traces her passion for education back to childhood. Shy and studious, she was an avid reader.

“The highlight of the summer was the day of the week the bookmobile would come to our neighborhood,” she recalls. “It would park on our street and you had a limit of 10 books. I’d get 10 books, read them, turn them in the next week and get 10 more.”

Time didn’t dim Smithey’s thirst for knowledge. She stokes the fire as an attorney and shareholder at Ogletree Deakins, one of the nation’s largest labor and employment law firms.

She assists clients primarily in the areas of retirement, health and welfare plans.

“For someone who’s kind of a lifelong learner, it doesn’t even feel like work,” Smithey imparts. “The way I explain it to people is that our clients are job creators – they’re businesses. And a big part of creating those jobs is making sure that you’ve got benefit packages that attract and retain the workers you need.

“Unfortunately, the benefit laws are super complex. So, my job is to break it down and understand what their goals are. Then cut through the complexity and help them get there so they can continue creating jobs and running their business.”

She’s also a longtime Indiana Chamber partner in educating businesses about employee benefits laws and regulations.

“Stephanie Smithey is our go-to-person for employee benefits,” comments Kerri Begley, vice president of business education and events. “She identifies topics for the annual Employee Benefits Seminar and is a presenter at that event. She has a dynamic rapport with our

attendees and helps them feel comfortable about asking questions.”

‘Real people behind every project’

Family photos adorn Smithey’s office. Sunlight streams through a window. Mementos from children Will (age 19) and Ellen (age 23) add to the warm ambience.

Behind Smithey’s desk is a poignant pen and ink drawing. It shows a group of people forming, with their bodies, the word, ‘humanistic.’”

“There’s lots of definitions of humanistic, but it’s basically somebody who’s really focused on human values, human emotion, advancing humanity – human focus,” she reflects. “My daughter made that her freshman year at college in an art class.

“I had it framed for my office because I do think that in the business world, sometimes people can lose sight of the fact that there’s real people behind every decision. There’s real people behind every project. Every deadline. That’s one reason why it spoke to me. It’s a reminder: ‘Don’t forget the people.’”

It’s a credo that guides Smithey professionally and personally. She celebrated her 25th anniversary practicing law in 2016.

Building knowledge, relationships

Smithey grew up in Greenwood and attended the University of Notre Dame, where she majored in English.

“At that time, I didn’t necessarily have a plan to be an attorney, but I always thought of law school as an interesting option just to learn about the law,” she remarks. “Then, I added a sociology major. Through that, I took some more classes that had some interaction with the law as a lot of sociology classes do.

“I kept getting more and more interested. Even when I applied to law school quite frankly, I didn’t know that I wanted to be a lawyer. But I always had an interest in learning. Learning the law. Learning about it.”

It wasn’t until she was studying at Loyola University Chicago



Stephanie Smithey enjoys the fast pace of life at Ogletree and working with colleagues to “build on each other’s knowledge.” She recently became co-chair of the firm’s employee benefits and executive compensation practice group and will transition to chair in 2018.

School of Law that she decided to pursue a career in litigation.

The catalyst? Working as a research assistant in the in-house legal department at BP (then known as Amoco Corporation).

“I enjoyed my work with the employment lawyers the most,” she divulges. “At that time, ERISA (Employee Retirement Income Security Act) was still fairly new. It had come around in 1974; this was the mid-’80s. There wasn’t a huge body of case law yet, so it was a developing area.

“I really developed an interest in the employment relationship and how a corporation’s counsel has to focus on benefits and employment law. That’s where I focused and that’s when I started thinking, ‘Hey, I may actually become a lawyer someday,’ as opposed to getting a law degree and using it to branch into something else.”

Smithey also completed a clerkship with

an employment and benefits law practice in Chicago. But home beckoned. After graduating from law school in 1991, she returned to Indiana with her husband TJ (a fellow Hoosier).

After practicing law in the state for a number of years, she joined Ogletree Deakins in 2007 and helped launch the employee benefits practice at its Indianapolis office.

She raves about her team.

“I have these people who are smart and hardworking and creative. At the same time, they’re nice people. It’s great,” she says with a laugh. “It’s simple, but it’s true. We build on each other’s knowledge. We build on what we’ve learned from the last client, the next client and it’s very collaborative.”

Educating and empowering

Smithey’s desire to learn and help others extends to the community. One example involves returning to her roots and volunteering

with the Girl Scouts of Central Indiana.

Growing up, she was a Girl Scout. As a mother, she cherishes memories celebrating Girl Scout’s 95th anniversary with her daughter in Washington D.C. in 2012.

In addition, Smithey lends her time and talents in assisting the Chamber’s members and customers.

As the Chamber’s director of publications, Matt Ottinger worked with Smithey for several years.

“We value her passion and expertise,” he emphasizes. “She holds the unique distinction of authoring or contributing to multiple books for us. She authors the *Employee Benefits Guide* and contributes to the *Indiana Employer’s Guide to Workplace Wellness*.”

Smithey calls the collaboration between the Chamber and Ogletree “a natural match.”

“The Chamber’s mission is very much aligned, I think, with Ogletree’s mission. Our tagline is, ‘Employers and lawyers working together.’ And the Chamber’s focus is on employment law, HR, benefits (among others). There’s a natural affiliation.”

Smithey enjoys connecting with Chamber conference attendees at all levels of experience.

“Every year at the (employee benefits) seminar, we have people who show up and say, ‘I’m brand new to benefits. I don’t know anything about it.’ And we have others who have been at the seminar eight or nine years. ... We try to meet people where they are and help them all learn.”

Pausing, she grins before adding, “I guess if I wasn’t a lawyer, I’d be a teacher, so it sort of fulfills that secret or latent need or desire to do that.”



Smithey’s longtime involvement with Girl Scouts began in second grade. In October, she was part of the central Indiana delegation that attended the Girl Scouts of USA’s national convention.