

MELISSA PROFFITT

ENGAGED ADVOCATE

By Rebecca Patrick



Fortunate is a word frequently uttered by longtime Indianapolis attorney Melissa Proffitt as she reflected on her life.

The reality, though, is a person tends to attract good fortune to them through their own actions. Proffitt certainly embodies that. She is always prepared, tireless and engaged in whatever she endeavors.

An employee benefits lawyer, Proffitt has spent her entire career with Ice Miller LLP, a general practice firm with 10 locations throughout the country; it's also one of the largest in the state.

She credits Ice Miller with affording her “a real variety of experiences and opportunities that has made me feel like I’ve had sort of multiple careers, but within the same place.”

The first half of her tenure was marked by devoting extra time beyond the practice of law to the firm in a management capacity. At an early age, Proffitt was welcomed at the leadership level – both the youngest managing partner and the first female, and later named office managing partner of the Indianapolis location multiple times.

In the last part of her career, the focus has turned more external as the partner-in-charge of client relations – with room also for increased community and political engagement.

As Proffitt puts it, “It’s been a really, really nice mix of both (worlds).”

BizVoice® What does your current job entail and what have you tried to do to make the firm even stronger?

MP: “(I’m) focused on business development. It was a role that was created for me. (Over the years), I learned a tremendous amount about our law firm, about our various practice areas and about all the lawyers. ... While I’m an employee benefits lawyer, the majority of the business I bring into the firm is in areas completely outside of my practice. I work extensively with other lawyers in the firm to grow and to retain a strong client base.

“It’s really fun for me to meet with clients and get to know them, be the relationship partner for the whole relationship, and then create the teams back at the office here to provide them the assistance that they need. I have all these great lawyers behind me that I can hand the work off to.”

BV: What motivates you on a daily basis?

MP: “I’ve got a lot of energy – I hope I don’t ever lose that. I wake up pretty energetic every day. ... I’ve gone through a series of those personality and profile tests of working in groups and working individually and how you put teams together, as I’m sure many of us have. I’m very competitive and I always thought of myself as externally competitive. What came back (in those tests) was that I really am much more internally competitive, so I truly compete more with myself than I necessarily do with others. I just wake up every day wanting to get that A+ in whatever or wherever that is. If it’s serving on a board or helping a political candidate or bringing in a new client or working on a project, I want to do the best I can do. So, I think that just sort of internal drive motivates me. And definitely, a good night’s sleep and a big cup or two of coffee in the morning helps as well!”

BV: Let’s talk about women in the workplace. We’ve both

seen positive changes in our lifetimes. How would you characterize where things stand today?

MP: “On one hand, women in the workplace are in a very good place – significantly better than when I started. I see a tremendous amount of mutual respect and admiration and desire to work together and to appreciate differences of opinions and different ways of approaching things. ... An area where I think there has not been nearly enough movement, and in fact we continue to be stagnated, is with regard to leadership roles.

“When you look at just the legal profession, the number of women managing partners I think is something at like 20%. But ever since I graduated from law school, we’ve been over 50% of the graduates. Some of this is choice by the women to drop out of the profession. But that being said, there are significantly less women in leadership positions – whether it’s CEO roles of any industry or in board positions for any kind of organization. Women leading at the top are still woefully underrepresented. Same within our political process (and elected officials). ... It is clear based upon how long we’ve been in the workforce and how much we’ve been contributing, we should have made much greater strides than we have in (leadership positions).”

BV: What are you doing away from work, away from volunteering? Where are you getting your enjoyment in life?

MP: “First and foremost is spending time with my children. Unfortunately, at this point, most of them don’t live in Indiana anymore, so I’m not able to spend as much time with them as I used to. We have a lake home at Lake Wawasee, which we go to every weekend in the summer and then sporadically throughout the year, and it’s truly a magnet for our family and for friends. I love spending time there. Both my husband, Tom, and I have a long list of places we’ve been and an even longer list of places that we want to go see. So, I would say international travel is way up there in terms of how we like to spend our time. I used to golf a lot – not so much anymore. At some point I’d like to get back into that; I miss golfing.”

BV: What’s the favorite place you’ve traveled to and where do you most want to go?

MP: “I have two favorite places. Africa is probably my favorite trip. We’re going on our third trip to Africa this December and taking all of our kids and significant others. ... We do safaris and see the gorillas and all of that. But I would say my favorite place to go in general is Italy. Just love the country,

love the people, love the food, love the wine. And then in terms of where we’d like to go, we have a long list. I would say the Scandinavian countries, Scotland and Ireland are up there on the top along with just a whole lot of other places.”

BV: What are some of the highlights for you at Ice Miller?

MP: “I’ve been very fortunate. Early on, I was introduced to some incredible client relationships that I was able to represent throughout my career. ... In addition, I’ve really valued my ability to be involved in the community with civic engagement and my political involvement. And the firm has always greatly supported me in those endeavors. I also started two practice areas. After a trade mission with Governor Daniels, I realized ag was a certain percentage of our GDP in Indiana and there wasn’t a law firm in the state that focused on agribusiness. So, I came back and started that practice group and then also started an energy practice as well. Those have been a lot of fun – a little bit of an entrepreneurial spirit within a larger organization.

“The firm has afforded me amazing opportunities to travel on I think a total of 17 trade missions with numerous governors and lieutenant governors and mayors. I’ve learned so much through those trips. One, you’re selling your state, you are trying to attract businesses from all over the globe to start a

business in Indiana. But at the same time, and equally important, you’re traveling for a week or 10 days with key business leaders from the state, and you really get to know them and understand what their issues, problems and concerns are.”

BV: You are the new Indiana Chamber board chair for the next year. What would you like to help the organization accomplish during that time?

MP: “My number one focus is to help ensure that Vanessa (Green Sindors), our new leader, continues to reach all her goals and her highest potential. It’s an exciting time for the Chamber under new leadership, lots of new thoughts and ideas, and I’m just here to support her as much as I possibly can. I, of course, want us to continue to challenge ourselves and up our game with our lobbying efforts and serve as a key leader in state initiatives. I’m very excited about so much of the research that we do and the information that we provide to the Statehouse and to executive leaders. Our (new) water study is an example to help move forward very positive legislation and efforts. We are an organization that is here to advocate for all employers throughout the state of all different sizes, and I just want to ensure that we serve them in the best way we possibly can. I want them to feel like we provide value and that we are genuinely interested in them.”

Continued on page 99



Proffitt says the backing from not only Ice Miller but her family has enabled her to prioritize community engagement: “They’re great; we talk about everything that I’m involved in, and it’s sort of a team sport and a family sport. Having that village around me to help and support has been very, very necessary.”