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Guiding growth at Thompson Coburn

Rowden takes reins as managing partner, firm now looks to increase ranks to 100-plus lawyers

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As a child, Todd A. Rowden listened to his grandfather's suggestion for a career.

The Russian immigrant, in broken English, would tell his grandson, "Todd, you loud speaker, you should be lawyer."

Though his maternal grandfather, Mike Vakula, died when Rowden was 8, that early suggestion stayed with him.

"It stuck in my mind and I decided when I was in sixth grade, I was going to be a lawyer," he said.

On Aug. 21, Rowden became the managing partner of Thompson, Coburn LLP's Chicago office. He replaced partner Francis X. Buckley Jr., who served as the office's managing partner since it opened in 2007.

Rowden practices business litigation with a focus on financial services matters, along with complex contract and business tort cases. He's also vice chair of the firm's business litigation practice.

Rowden, a native of Lapeer, Mich., was the third of Richard and Dolores Rowden's four children.

"The only lawyer I knew growing up was Perry Mason — and that was reruns," Rowden said.

He graduated with honors from the University of Michigan-Flint, then enrolled at the University of Wisconsin Law School and graduated from there in 1989.

After finishing law school and passing the Illinois bar, Rowden moved to Chicago and worked at Wilson & McIlvaine. He became a partner there and stayed when that firm merged with Quarles & Brady LLP.

Rowden left Quarles & Brady in 2004 and started his own law office in Schaumburg. He joined Thompson, Coburn as a lateral partner in October 2007.

Thompson, Coburn had opened its 34-lawyer Chicago office just three months earlier, after merging with FagelHaber LLC.

St. Louis-based Thompson, Coburn has 350 lawyers working in four U.S. offices. The Chicago office now consists of 62 lawyers.

Rowden recently spoke with the Daily Law Bulletin about his new role, plans for continued growth and an unusual job he had while growing up.

Law Bulletin: What are your duties and responsibilities as managing partner?

Rowden: To lead the Chicago office and to grow the Chicago office — which we've grown by 82 percent in the past six years through lateral partners joining. And to run our office finances prudently.

LB: What are your plans and goals as managing partner?

Rowden: To continue to accelerate our aggressive lateral partner recruitment. We use 15 to 20 search firms to do that. To work with each of my partners to address their concerns and their needs and inform them of management decisions. And to serve as an additional resource both externally with their

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Todd A. Rowden

Managing partner, Thompson, Coburn LLP's Chicago office

- **Location:** Chicago
- **Size:** Firmwide revenues of \$164.5 million in 2012
- **Lawyers:** 62
- **Age:** 49
- **Law school:** University of Wisconsin Law School, 1989
- **Organizations:** Judge administrator, Palatine Police Peer Jury
- **Interests:** Spending time with his wife and four sons, coaching sons' baseball teams, scuba diving, exercising

clients and prospects and internally with our other three offices.

LB: What are the major challenges facing Thompson, Coburn's Chicago office?

Rowden: Our challenge is to match the growth that we've experienced these past six years. Another challenge is to continue to deliver value to our clients. Yet another challenge, as a relative newcomer to Chicago, is increasing the visibility of our office. To do that, we will attract good lateral candidates from large firms like Kirkland & Ellis LLP, where certain partners might face rate-sensitive clients whose practices are better able to be grown with our firm and its lower rate structure.

In addition, we will continue to attract partners from smaller firms who want to grow their practices with our more diverse client base and multiple offices.

Another challenge is to properly

integrate those laterals into Thompson, Coburn. We have a formalized integration program with the expected orientations, systems and procedures. But we also couple that with personal connections with practice group members and office members.

LB: What attributes do you have that you believe will make you an effective managing partner?

Rowden: I was the first true lateral partner hired in this office. In so being, I've learned and grown to like my colleagues and the firm's culture. I'm a good listener and I enjoy addressing problems and resolving them. I'm a passionate proponent of Thompson, Coburn. It's the best firm I've been affiliated with.

LB: What are the future plans to increase the number of lawyers in the Chicago office?

Rowden: The growth will be driven by practice group needs. We're always looking for corporate litigation folks. But we also want to expand some of our more focused groups — such as environmental, health care, real estate and zoning and intellectual property. While there is no specific number, I think we expect to push past 100 lawyers in the near future. Chicago is the firm's primary growth sector and we're going to take full advantage of it.

LB: How did the economic downturn impact the firm overall and its Chicago office?

Rowden: We are a firm that functions from a fiscally conservative perspective. We have no debt, and we don't borrow money. So while that time was challenging, we never laid off anyone. We used that opportunity to demonstrate to many of our clients, particularly our financial services clients, commitment and partnership in weathering the storm.

LB: What is an interesting fact about you that others might not know?

Rowden: I worked at my uncle's drag strip, Lapeer Dragway, from the time I was 8 years old until I moved to Wisconsin for law school. I filled various roles including selling "pit passes," announcing and inspecting race cars for safety equipment. Working at the dragway taught me customer service and that you always take care of your customers if you want a successful business.

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