

Q&A

What do you see as your firm's role in the local legal community?

I think from my standpoint — we were born and raised here — so from that standpoint we look at it as we're a Las Vegas-based firm and I think our role is to represent Las Vegas and the people who live in Las Vegas. We're very proud of the community and we're very proud of what we provide as far as legal services.

What are your plans for future growth?

We intend to grow at a controlled pace, I don't want to just get big to get big. We do a lot of work with training of the attorneys, and so we usually try to add maybe one to two a year. Unfortunately people — things happen — people leave or they go out on their own. We're going to lose one of our associates, he's going back up to Utah to be a clerk for a federal judge. That's a good thing, in a way, but we lose a very good attorney here. So we'd like to grow at a steady pace and reach between 20 and 30. I'm not sure I want to get any bigger than that — there are a lot of headaches that go with it.

When did you move into your offices?

We moved here, I believe it was in December 1997. We'd always been downtown before. But we've been here (at the Hughes Center) since then.

Any plans to move?

Oh no. In fact we just extended our lease. We remodeled and extended the lease so we'll be here for another 10-plus years.

What is your role in the firm?

I'm designated as the managing partner which means I do a little bit of everything. We do have kind of an assignment position for some of the partners. Like one of the partners is more in charge of monitoring the financial end of it. Another partner is in charge of training of the associates and the law clerks and another partner is in charge of recruiting. So we've got kind of a division as far as that goes. But usually if there's any issues that have to be decided as far as personnel, it starts with the managing partner and goes from there. Plus I keep track of everybody (laughing).

How is your time allocated?

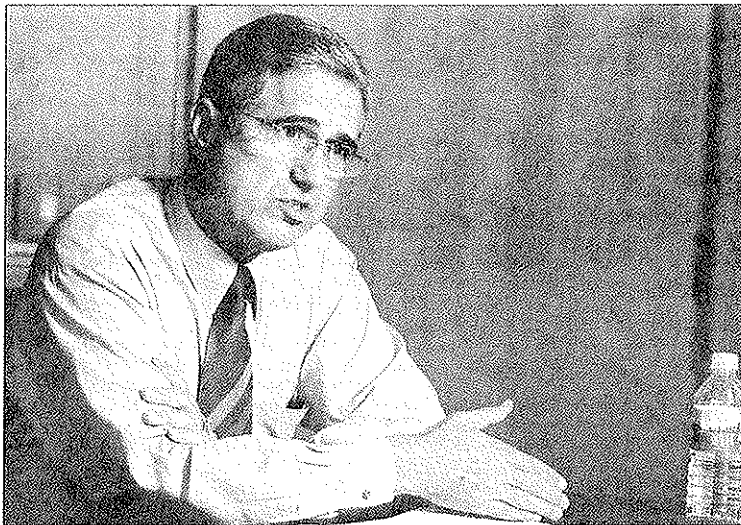
I try to spend as much time as I can on legal matters for the clients but also I have to do these other jobs, if you want to call them that. So I would probably say 75 to 80 percent of my time is spent on the legal work and the other 20 percent or so is spent on the administrative duties. But we do have an office administrator who handles an awful lot of that. She's very good and that helps. So that takes a lot of the burden off of us.

How many women does the firm employ?

We have two women partners and right now we have two female associates and two more will be joining us within the month, and right now we have a female law clerk.

How many are ethnic minorities?

I really don't know. I don't look at them from that standpoint. I do know that one of our secretaries is from Southeast Asia.



STEVE MARCUS / STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

William Urga

Managing partner of Jolley Urga Wirth Woodbury & Standish

William Urga is proud to be a hometown lawyer. The managing partner and co-founder of Jolley Urga Wirth Woodbury & Standish, who has practiced law in Las Vegas since graduating from Hastings Law School in San Francisco in 1970, has mixed feelings about the way growth has changed the city and the legal community.

He said his firm's role is to be the premier Las Vegas-based law firm. He and co-founder Gardner Jolley are Las Vegas natives and feel it is important to maintain core values from the city's early days amid a rapidly changing legal community.

It is a full-service firm, doing mostly litigation, personal injury, probate, estate, transactional, administrative, liquor and gaming work. As managing partner, Urga spends about 25 percent of his time doing administrative tasks. He and the other partners divvy up responsibilities so everyone can still spend most of their time doing what they love: practicing law. They pride themselves on their professional, cordial — some call it old-fashioned — conduct in an increasingly disjointed legal community.

It's a strategy that seems to be working. Jolley Urga Wirth Woodbury & Standish is one of the top firms in the valley, with about 20 attorneys and a recently remodeled 16th floor office in the Hughes Center's Wells Fargo Tower that boasts an impressive view of the valley. The firm has turned down several buyout offers from regional and national firms, with the partners feeling it is better for the firm, and their clients, to have local control.

INTERVIEWED BY STEPHANIE TAVARES

National firms are increasingly moving into the valley, how do you think that is affecting — or do you think that is affecting — the dynamic of the legal community here?

I think it has had an effect. We've had waves of firms that have come in over the years. It started with the firms from Northern Nevada coming down here and then we've had a series of firms that came in from Arizona and Southern California that weren't very successful — they had some problems. But I think since the construction defect litigation has started here you're seeing a lot more law firms come in that would otherwise probably not have come here.

I also think that because Las Vegas is such a growing area you're now seeing firms that are regional and even national firms that are coming in because I guess they see this as an op-

portunity in the legal profession, which I think demonstrates that Las Vegas is a big city.

Is that changing the way that Las Vegas firms are going about their business?

I think it has had an impact. First and foremost it had an impact on the salary structure. Some of the firms that have come in have been very aggressive in hiring people so there've been a lot of changes as far as people leaving firms or partners leaving firms. That's kind of settled down a little bit, but you've seen that. And I think it has increased the intensity of the litigation and the new areas that you now get involved in because now you're dealing with larger firms and there's going to be more attorneys involved.

Has anyone come in and made an offer for your firm?

We've been approached numerous times and, at this point we kind of like the way we are. We're a Las Vegas-based firm and we want to stay that way.

Are you keeping that door open for the future?

Well, there's never a door that's ever closed but at this point I don't think we're interested in becoming part of a larger firm based out of state. That's not our desire.

What do you see as the big issues facing lawyers and law firms in Las Vegas?

I think there are several issues. Obviously one of those issues is the competition and the intensity of the litigation. As we get larger and get more attorneys here I think you're seeing less civility. Someone like myself who's been practicing for almost 36 years here, it's almost a change I'm not very comfortable with. I grew up with the idea that your word was your bond and we were professionals and then when an attorney gave his word or he made representations or indicated things to the other side, to other attorneys, you held to it.

I think due to the fact that we now have over 3,000 attorneys here it gets a little more difficult for that to happen and you're seeing a lot more letter writing and a lot more, I think, animosity among attorneys. Fortunately at my level I don't run into it as much because the people I'm dealing with in most cases are at my level, and we've known each other or dealt with each other and so are not party to that.

Other issues that come up is the lack of familiarity even among associates. With 3,000 attorneys you don't know each other. On the other hand, you're also seeing more specialization. You're seeing firms where they'll have a transactional department, a litigation department, a probate department, so you see a lot more specialization and a lot less of the general practice.

Is that the direction that your firm has gone?

We call it "areas of emphasis" and we've done that over the years. Partners are more involved in one area or certain areas than others. Unfortunately I'm kind of the dinosaur. I'm kind of the one who seems to be involved in more than one area so I kind of cross over a lot of them and we have two or three other partners who are like that. But I think that you're seeing more and more specialization. It's almost required because it's becoming so technical anymore. The issues are becoming a lot more complex so you're seeing people with areas of interest or at least areas that they specialize in.

Are there any big-picture concerns or opportunities that you can foresee?

The big-picture concern is something that's been talked about over the years: it's civility. It's something that needs to be worked on. You should be able to go into court and do battle with your opponent but then you should be able to walk outside and go have lunch and not have the kind of animosity that I see that seems to be creeping into society.

I suppose though, the other big issue from a lawyer's standpoint is that the more advertising and other things you see, the less of a reputation I think lawyers have, which always concerned me. We're a profession and as a professionals I had hoped that we would hold ourselves up to a higher standard than other businesses or other people have to adhere to and it concerns me if

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we're not doing that.

What's your reaction to the recent Los Angeles Times series concerning conflicts of interest with Nevada judges?

My first reaction was that a lot of the information was really old news. I mean a lot of that information had been out for years and years and years so it wasn't anything new or different. ... I have found that over the years if you go in well-prepared in a case you'll get the right decision. The judges are not being swayed by what this article talked about. You always have issues, I mean, everyone is human, but if you're well-prepared and present your case properly, judges don't like to be reversed. And that's the worst thing that can happen, I think, from their standpoint.

On the topic of election of judges, it has been something that we've done as long as there's been a state and we're not unique in that regard. And as our U.S. Supreme Court has indicated not that long ago, judges' election races are no better than any other races and people have to go out and raise money and where are judges going to go to but to lawyers? That's their first choice, so you have that problem no matter what you do.

I would hope that the judges aren't making decisions based on who is making campaign contributions to them. I saw that article and I think sometimes people, when you talk to the losing side, you might get a little more sour grapes than you would from the other side and I disagreed with some of the issues that that article raised. I happened to be involved in a couple of the cases so I know what took place. And so I'm not sure that it was a full and fair analysis of what was going on.

Do you donate to judges' campaigns?

We don't donate that much. Again, we've over the years taken the position that we really haven't (donated to judges). Now there's obviously certain cases where we have and we've obviously lent our names on occasion, but we don't make it a practice as some firms do to make substantial contributions.

What do you consider a substantial contribution?

I would think anything over \$1,000 from a law firm or lawyer would be considered major. I think any lawyers donating between \$250 and \$500 level would be considered less significant. Again, you'd hate to think that a judge would be in a position that a particular lawyer is giving them \$250 or \$500 and that they would make a decision based on that. But I don't believe that they would.

Do you think there are any reforms that are needed in that arena?

It's an issue that's been debated and debated and debated whether we should appoint our judges or elect our judges. Now the appointment process has the advantage that the judge then doesn't have to go out and raise campaign money by going to lawyers or casinos or wherever but the flip side of that is will the appointment process be such that you're really getting a true quality appointment? Historically we've done a pretty good job that way.

Panels have been selected and they go through and weed out the candidates down to three and then the governors made the final decision. And I'm going to guess as many as half of our judges sitting there today were originally appointed at some point. Either somebody died, somebody resigned or moved on to a higher court. So there has been an appointment process that has already been in place at least initially. So I

understand that maybe people are against the appointment process.

I think the bar talked about at least having the judge run once so there's at least an initial election and after that run against your record. I would think they're going to look at this again. Because that article brought it once again to the forefront about judges having to go to lawyers for campaign contributions or to the casinos.

Now, having said all of that, I think by changing it to elections every six years, that's helped to resolve the problem to a certain extent, too. Because judges now sit a lot longer before they have to run again and that has made a difference, I think.

There's going to be quite a bit of turnover in judges this year. What are law firms carefully watching in these races?

I think from the lawyers' standpoint, from our standpoint because we're a civil law firm, we don't do criminal, one of our concerns is that the appointments are of people who have civil experience -- that have dealt in the civil arena so they're not surprised when we start talking about equitable mortgages or we're dealing with complex real estate issues or commercial litigation versus criminal lawyers who will be dealing with the criminal side of it. So I'm kind of prejudiced from that standpoint. I'd like to see more civil attorneys, although I have to admit a couple of the appointments have come from the district attorney's office and I think they've done an excellent job.

But ... the key is to get quality people. Good lawyers will be able to figure out how to do civil cases and criminal cases. That's what lawyers are going to be looking at. And now we're going to have a lot of new judges. We've got a lot of experienced judges who are either going to be retiring or have retired and there are also going to be some new openings coming up, so we're going to see a lot of changes in the judges.

How do you think the opening of the law school has affected the legal community in Southern Nevada?

I think it's been helpful. They talked about a law school 20, 30 years ago and I was against it at that point because I thought it would be a second-rate law school. But with the Boyds and other people who stepped up and put the money up and with Dean (Richard) Morgan, who is an outstanding dean, I think they've created a first-rate law school that has jumped up into the top 100 within five or six years, which I think is an amazing feat.

And the quality of the attorneys that are coming out has increased. From a law firm standpoint it's a nice source of finding associates. We have ourselves hired two and we have a law clerk who is going to school there.

What is your perception of the school's strengths and weaknesses?

For a school as young as the Boyd Law School is, I think it's got a good reputation. The dean has done a good job of finding quality teachers and the quality of the students has increased and I think it added a nice dimension to the practice of law in Nevada. We now have a law review that can review Supreme Court of Nevada decisions and comment on them and write on the valid legal issues that we didn't have before. And it's offered a lot of help to a lot of residents who can't afford legal help. It has a lot of legal clinics. What I would like to see is a little higher pass rate for those taking the bar -- that would be helpful. But Nevada has a tough bar, so it's not an easy thing to do.

What does having a law school here mean for future of law in southern Nevada?

I think it's only going to get better. ... I think you're just going to see the quality of the law school and the legal community increase.