

JILL FELKINS

'Jill of All Trades' Sees Big Picture in Litigation Practice

by Maureen Wilkey



Jill Felkins has been practicing law for just 12 years, but she's already a senior shareholder at Segal McCambridge Singer & Mahoney.

Joining the firm immediately after she finished law school in 2007, Felkins has worked diligently to build a diverse litigation practice and bring new business to the firm. Because of that hard work and her ability to see the big picture, she now serves on the firm's strategic planning committee and has her eye on additional leadership roles within the firm.

"I lucked out to find a firm that allowed me to challenge myself early in my career," Felkins says. "Throughout my time here, my colleagues have shown confidence in me and my ability to succeed, and that has helped get me where I am today."

Felkins did not picture herself as a lawyer early on. She majored in journalism with a concentration in business at Indiana University. After taking a few business law classes, she decided she could apply her passion for writing to a career as an attorney.

Although Felkins joined Segal McCambridge as a generalist, she gradually realized she was very interested in product liability and toxic tort law because she loved continuing to learn the evolving medicine and science involved in the cases she was working on.

CLASS ACTION AND APPEALS

She also found she had an interest in class action and appellate work, which came together

in one of the biggest cases of her career, *LHO Indianapolis One Lessee, LLC v. Bowman*.

"I handled this case through many different stages by myself, taking all of the depositions, leading the evidentiary hearing on class certification, drafting the appeal, and writing all the briefs throughout the case," Felkins says. "It combined a lot of the things I love about practicing law."

The case was a class action suit in which Felkins' client, a hotel, was accused of causing food poisoning in a number of customers at one of its Indianapolis locations. The court certified a class, which might have cost the defendant a large sum of money to settle or pay in damages. But Felkins was able to obtain a reversal of class certification in the Indiana Court of Appeals.

"We made strategic decisions that led to a favorable outcome for our client," Felkins says. "I put a lot of sweat equity into that case, and our ability to operate as a team helped us resolve the case in a way that worked for the defendant."

Felkins started working on the case as a senior associate and finished it when she was well into partnership at the firm. Along the way, she proved to her colleagues that she had the legal acumen and leadership abilities to become a senior shareholder at her firm. Her clients see these same qualities in her.

"Jill has helped us work through the legal process every step of the way and has made it as easy and comfortable as possible," says

Sally Castillo, vice president at Los Fernandez Rosticeria. "She's young and very friendly and agreeable, but when she is advocating for us, she is very much a shark."

Felkins has represented Castillo's restaurant group in its interactions with the city of Elmhurst over the past four years. Although Felkins started working with her company when she was in her early 30s, Castillo always felt Felkins was leading the way, staying on top of matters with Los Fernandez as if it were her only client—even though Felkins was always working on several other matters.

BRANCHING OFF

Opposing counsel Colin Dunn with Colin Dunn LLC agrees that Felkins is a very capable advocate for her clients. Dunn represented plaintiffs in several cases involving injuries at a playground at Maggie Daley Park. Felkins represented one of the defendants. Felkins' client was the only defendant of about 10 to obtain summary judgment.

"Too many times, defense counsel just object to everything, and the judges get tired of it. Jill makes cases tougher than that," Dunn says. "She really thinks through the cases and makes the points that need to be made. Many lawyers in their first 10 or 20 years of practice haven't figured that out yet."

While Felkins enjoys working on class action and appellate cases, she has also become something of a "Jill of All Trades" at Segal

McCambridge. She started off defending companies in toxic tort cases primarily involving asbestos matters but has branched off into product liability, premises liability, transportation, FDCPA/TCPA and some personal injury matters.

“There’s a lot of value that comes from diversifying my practice, which allows me to provide a high level of service to the client no matter what the subject matter of the lawsuit is,” Felkins says.

“I’ve also been able to expand my practice by working in both Illinois and Indiana. I have always challenged myself to take on whatever case I can. Through that, I have been able to prove my skills to myself and others.”

Although Felkins likes a challenge, she has never believed her gender presented any challenges as she progressed at Segal McCambridge. She was sometimes the only female attorney in a room at depositions or court hearings, but she never felt like her colleagues questioned her ability to work on the same level as anyone else. Felkins knows, however, that the legal industry is still working toward equality for women, especially when it comes to women in partnership or leadership roles at their firms.

“I’m always willing to help female associates at Segal McCambridge. I want them to feel like they can challenge themselves and be noticed and recognized for their hard work and achievements irrespective of their gender,” Felkins says. “I want to make sure female attorneys always have the ability to grow in their careers.”

Felkins also works with Chicago-Kent College of Law on an externship program in which law students work at Segal McCambridge while attending school in exchange for school credit. This gives the students a chance to be exposed to all kinds of work that goes on at the firm.

Because she loves the collegial atmosphere at her firm, Felkins feels she is paying it forward from the many mentors at Segal McCambridge who helped her out during her own career. She credits Bill Mahoney for being a visionary and reminding her to see the big picture, Nathan Horne from the firm’s Austin office for pushing her to hone her business development skills, and Jason Kennedy for teaching her the value of perspective and collegiality.

“The people keep me here. I have a lot of great mentors as well as a lot of great friends at this firm,” Felkins says.

SUPPORTING CAUSES AND LEADING

In addition to giving back to her profession by mentoring young attorneys and law students, Felkins also contributes to her community. She is a steering committee member and communications co-chair of

Illinois Women Conquer ALZ, an organization that raises awareness and funds to help end the Alzheimer’s epidemic.

“Our firm has been very supportive of this cause, which has been taken up by several attorneys at the firm who have personally been affected by Alzheimer’s,” Felkins says. “Alzheimer’s primarily impacts women, both in terms of those who develop the disease and those who act as caregivers. Our firm has fielded a team to fundraise for Chicago’s Walk to End Alzheimer’s for several years, and we are proud to be among the top-earning teams in the city.”

Felkins is committed to being a leader at Segal McCambridge as well. She already serves on the firm’s diversity and inclusion committee and its strategic planning committee, joining the latter as the first junior shareholder to do so. She also worked on the real estate committee when the firm’s lease came up for renewal last year.

She liked working on the bigger picture of planning for the future and becoming involved in some of the business aspects of running a law firm. Rather than relocate, Segal McCambridge decided to stay at its current location at Willis Tower, leveraging the value of the existing buildout and focusing its

renovation efforts on updating the space and increasing amenities.

“I like thinking about where the firm’s future is heading,” Felkins says. “I want to stay involved by serving on more committees and playing a meaningful role in its future.”

Felkins is glad she is now getting to help young attorneys in the same way her colleagues helped her when she was fresh out of law school. As someone who hit the ground running when she started her practice, she has a simple piece of advice for young attorneys just starting out.

“There is no substitute for hard work,” Felkins says. “The technical skills you learn in law school are a great cornerstone, but dedication and hard work are what make the difference between a good attorney and a great attorney.”

This “Jill of All Trades” also believes it is important to feed your personal passions, which for Felkins includes a love of travel. She previously trekked the Inca Trail and is eagerly anticipating a trip to Greece.

Felkins has accomplished a lot during her years as an attorney. Looking ahead, she hopes to continue to grow her practice and take on more leadership roles at her firm, while helping others through mentorship, leadership and community service. ■



With the Segal McCambridge group in 2018 at the Alzheimer’s Association’s Paint the Night Purple



Felkins at the 15th-century Inca citadel of Machu Picchu in Peru