Proskauer

Alumni Spotlight: Eugene Holmes From Detroit to Disney – and the Value of the Proskauer Experience

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For Proskauer alumnus Eugene Holmes, life as a lawyer has taken him from coast to coast, and from enchantment with business to the business of enchantment. Born and raised in Detroit, Michigan, he graduated Michigan State before heading east to earn his J.D. from Boston University School of Law. He then headed south to a law firm in Washington, D.C., where he joined a team of employee benefits lawyers who ultimately became part of Proskauer. A few years later, he traveled due west for a dream job – that of assistant general counsel at Walt Disney Company in Burbank, California. We asked Eugene about his journey, his experiences at Proskauer and his work behind the scenes at the magical world of Disney.

Why did you become a lawyer?

The idea of becoming a lawyer first came from my father while I was in high school, yet it did not fully resonate with me until college. At Michigan State University, I lived in the same residence hall where the James Madison College School of Public Policy is located. Interacting with JMC students every day helped lay the foundation towards law school and becoming a lawyer. After many, many spirited debates with these students during meal hours, I changed my major from communications to social science pre-law. And the rest is history, as the saying goes.

Why did you choose Proskauer?

I joined Proskauer with Paul Hamburger and a group of lawyers from another Washington, D.C.-based firm. We came over to help Proskauer solidify the employee benefits practice in Washington, D.C. It was a great move and truly educational.

Tell us about your Proskauer experience.

I had a great Proskauer experience. Specifically, I had the opportunity to work on a wide range of legal issues in the employee benefits area and to meet experienced folks in the field. Paul Hamburger had the biggest influence on my time at Proskauer, which was great since I had worked with him for quite a few years.

How did your experience at Proskauer help prepare you for your current job?

Because I prepared a wide range of spot issues at Proskauer, it encouraged me to take a more practical approach to my work. This has helped to shape the way I view things now.

What do you like most about your current role at Walt Disney Company?

In short, the challenge. It is a much larger organization, so I interact with a lot of clients who are in different locations – same teams, but in different places – so even basics like putting names with faces was a little challenging.

Working for a company is quite different from working in a law firm in that, when you tell people whom you work for, they automatically associate a product with the company. And this is *Disney*. So, people know exactly what you do and for whom you are working.

However, there are similarities to a law firm, too. There is a wide range of issues and you do get a lot of exposure to what's going on.

Any advice for someone thinking about going in-house?

A couple of things. Be prepared for handling a wide range of issues. Understand that in-house things move very quickly. So we don't necessarily focus in deeply on any particular issue – we're trying to answer quick, in-the-moment questions and help the business achieve its goal at the same time. If you want to turn over every rock and every kernel, it's probably not best to be in an in-house position. We still deal with legal issues, but at a higher level, and will use an outside law firm to assist with the fine detail. When making the move, be mentally and professionally ready, so this way you know what to expect.

What did you want to be when you were a kid?

A professional basketball player. I loved the Detroit Pistons!

Any mentors or role models?

I have been fortunate to have had quite a few positive influences in my life, in addition to my parents, of course. There are a whole host of teachers, professors and administrators, from grade school through law school, who have helped guide me along the way. These folks are both my mentors and real-life role models, and I talk to many of them regularly.

Any advice for junior associates?

Three things. First, think about the practice of law as a *relationship* business. It's never too early to start cultivating relationships. The first significant work that I brought to a firm came from someone whom I met at an ABA conference when I was a few years out of law school. We stayed in touch. Turns out the person became a deputy GC a few years after our first encounter and was able to hire benefits counsel.

Second, try to get out of the mode of thinking about your practice only in terms of the legal substance. In other words, continue to ask yourself: How does what I do from a legal perspective impact my client's business? This will allow you to better anticipate issues and offer more practical business solutions, because you will better understand the *big picture*.

Lastly, have fun! If you're not having fun during working hours, make every effort to have fun during non-working hours. Do something that you love.

When you're not in the office, where might people find you?

Running – out on the trail. I am an avid marathoner – I have run probably about 15 or so. My personal best is 2:51 in the California International. My best advice to other runners: ongoing training – be persistent in your training.

Where would your dream vacation be?

The Aulani (Disney resort) in Hawaii!

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