

Early ambitions panning out at full-service Los Angeles firm

Over two decades Manning & Kass has grown from 16 attorneys to more than 150

By Alexandra Schwappach
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What creates the strongest personal bonds? A near-death experience. That is what Manning & Kass, Ellrod, Ramirez, Trester LLP attorney Steven D. Manning said to convince his partners to jump out of plane with him just weeks after they had split from Morris Polich & Purdy LLP in Los Angeles to form their own firm in 1994.

Twenty years later, Manning is still taking his partners on daring adventures, but with many more guests in tow. The L.A. firm, which started out with 16 attorneys, now boasts five offices, 32 practice areas and more than 150 lawyers.

"I saw a future where people could work together and celebrate successes and encourage and support each other," said Manning, who defends law enforcement officials and public entities.

Manning's philosophy when starting Manning & Kass revolved around teamwork, optimism and encouragement. His escapades are meant to stimulate those feelings.

"I do this to show that it's impossible not to have fear," Manning said. "But if you can overcome it, it's exhilarating. You grow in strength and in confidence."

Confidence was essential when the firm was founded, as many doubted its ability to survive, Manning said. The founding partners dreamed of eventually becoming a full-service firm with dozens of practice areas, but in the beginning started with just two: insurance fraud litigation and police civil liability work.



MANNING

KASS

"We started planting seeds to get that diversity growing," said Dennis B. Kass, a founding partner who heads the firm's complex litigation team. "Everything we did in the early years was driven by our clients."

Kass said he and the other founding partners estimated that 80 percent of their clients from Morris would follow them to the new firm. They were pleasantly surprised when 100 percent came along.

The firm brought on its first associate — Kass' law school friend Erwin A. Nepomuceno — in late 1994 due to an increasing amount of workers' compensation cases. Nepomuceno heads what is a now a 25-lawyer workers' compensation group.

Additional practice areas began to form over time — including real estate, health care liability and intellectual property — and the firm spread out geographically, opening an Orange County office in 1995. By 2003, the firm had offices in San Diego, San Francisco and Arizona.

The firm's next big growth spurt will come in June, when the founders plan to open a New York office.

"This will definitely be a jump for us," Manning said of the New York City office

opening. "We will start small there with just two attorneys, but eventually we want to replicate the mothership."

Diversity has been the name of the game for Manning & Kass, and that philosophy has been mirrored in the types of cases they handle.

In a 2012 state Supreme Court case, the firm represented the owners of an amusement park who were sued by a woman who injured her wrist during a bumper car ride. Attorneys argued that there was an inherent assumption of risk when partaking in theme park rides, and the high court agreed. *Nalwa v. Cedar Fair LP*, S195031 (2012).

In another high-profile case, this time at the U.S. Supreme Court, the firm represented a Public Health Service doctor who was one of many being sued for allegedly ignoring the medical condition of an El Salvadorian immigrant while he was in custody pending deportation on drug charges. The Supreme Court unanimously reversed the decisions of the lower courts in 2010, agreeing with Manning & Kass attorneys Steve J. Renick and Patrick L. Hurley that the doctor couldn't be sued in the case because of immunity provisions. *Hui v. Castaneda*, 08-1529 (2008).

Manning can rattle off dozens of other cases the firm has handled over its 20 year saga — shooting cases, matters defending real estate brokers, employment law cases, and suits involving auto accidents.

Manning is proud of his firm's tendency to take cases to trial, he said.

The firm's founders would like to see the next 20 years include more practice areas and a global presence. "We will be an international firm," Kass said. "It's not going to happen overnight, but we are really excited about our future."