



# AMERICAN EXECUTIVE

**Gene Pridgen explains that there is no better way to celebrate this firm's 50th anniversary than with a growth spurt.**

## **Kennedy Covington**

# Best and Brightest



In 1957, the Charlotte, NC-based law firm of Kennedy Covington consisted of four partners and two associates. Today, its staff of experienced lawyers totals more than 200, and according to Gene Pridgen, managing partner, much of that growth has occurred in the past few years.

"Attracting the best and brightest legal talent is critical to our success, and we have been successful in doing that at the entry level and the associate and partner level," he said.

For associate and partner positions, the firm receives resumes from all over the country, including cities such as Boston, Los Angeles,

New York, and Chicago, since attorneys from these markets are familiar with sophisticated work. In fact, the firm hired 29 lawyers in 2006 alone, only nine of which were entry-level positions. "Our clients expect us to grow our services as they grow their business. Many times, their needs fall into niche practice areas," said Pridgen.

### **Location, location, location**

The firm's substantial growth, at least in part, is due to its location. Charlotte has grown dramatically in the last 15 years, and the Research Triangle/Raleigh/Durham area is in the midst of a boom as well. "We have placed our strategic bets on these areas. We find that young people from all over the country are choosing Charlotte and the Research Triangle because they can have a strong practice and a high quality of life. In some cities, you have to choose between the two. Our people don't have to make that decision—they can have it all."

But Pridgen believes that the firm's success and its broad practice areas attract talent more than its location. Kennedy Covington is a full-service business law firm organized into four major departments, one of the largest being real estate, which covers everything from land development to environmental issues to leasing. "Our real estate practice has benefited from the housing and business boom in Charlotte and the Research Triangle," Pridgen said.

Kennedy Covington's litigation department covers the spectrum as well, including real estate, commercial, employment law, and financial litigation. Its financial services department manages syndicated lending, bankruptcies, financial restructuring, securitization, and other complicated matters for the two primary banks headquartered in Charlotte, as well as several out-of-state clients. The firm's business law

department, where Pridgen has spent most of his career, covers mergers and acquisitions, private equity, securities, intellectual property, employee benefits, tax and estates, health law, and government relations, among other services.

### **Sense of direction**

Retaining talent is just as important as finding it, and, like other businesses, the folks at Kennedy Covington put professional development opportunities on the top of their priority lists. The firm has developed a mentoring system called Path to Leadership made up of "off-team" mentors (from another practice area) and "on-team" mentors (from the same practice area). "On-team mentors guide our developing employees through their day-to-day practice, while off-team mentors lend an ear to someone on another team experiencing problems they may not feel comfortable talking about with their team members," said Pridgen.

A critical element in the training process is a strong sense of direction. To that end, every attorney, associate, and partner prepares an annual practice plan. "It is an opportunity to put professional goals in writing. The plan focuses on client development, marketing, and service to the bar and the community. Associates review their practice plans with their mentors, and we have found that to be a useful exercise," Pridgen explained.

Most skills training is done on the job and relies on feedback from clients and supervisors, but Kennedy Covington fills in the gaps with year-round educational programs in each practice area. The firm also offers leadership and marketing training. "We are interested in developing the whole attorney—not just someone who is technically qualified, but someone who knows how to develop a practice."

### **Ties that bind**

The most prudent marketing strategy for a law firm is simply providing top-of-the-line service. "We can never forget that we are in the service business and that doing a great job produces more business from our existing clients, who are

good referrals for new clients," said Pridgen. But Kennedy Covington takes it a step further by getting involved in the community.

Not only does the firm donate money to non-profit organizations throughout the Carolinas, including the North Carolina Museum of Art, the American Diabetes Association, Susan G. Komen Race for the Cure, and the United Way, but many of its attorneys serve in leadership roles. In fact, Pridgen is the president of the Boy Scouts of America Mecklenburg County Council, serves on the board of the United Way of Central Carolinas, and is active in the North Carolina Bar Association. "We all feel an obligation to give back. We don't think that money alone is enough," he said.

Last fall, Kennedy Covington decided to become more involved with historically black universities. Pridgen and others sat down with the dean of an historically black North Carolina law school. The discussion led to a partnership with the school in which two attorneys taught a course for free. "The dean made an interesting observation. He said another law firm sends the school money but has never set foot on campus. That was a reminder to me that you have to be involved; you can't just send a check. That is expected at our firm."

In addition to helping a local law school, the partnership was a boon for Kennedy Covington's diversity initiative. Over the past several years, the firm has concentrated on hiring men and women of all ethnicities. "If law firms don't take the lead in diversity, who will? Law firms are about social justice. Diversity binds us together and makes us part of something bigger, and we found that to be a powerful message." ■

—Liz French

**Kennedy Covington**  
ATTORNEYS AT LAW

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**CORPORATE SPOTLIGHT**

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