

How BigLaw Vets Are Expanding Trial Boutique Dowd Bennett

By Lynn LaRowe

Law360 (March 20, 2024, 9:02 AM EDT) -- Boutique litigation firm Dowd Bennett LLP has expanded this year with new shops in Chicago and Dallas, but co-founder James Bennett said such moves are not part of an overarching strategic growth plan.

Instead, Bennett said the firm he started with fellow BigLaw veteran Ed Dowd Jr. has sought to be "ready and in a position to grow when it makes sense for our clients, for the firm and for the lawyers."

Since Bennett and Dowd left Bryan Cave Leighton Paisner LLP and founded the St. Louis-based firm in 2006, it has grown from four lawyers to more than 40. Their aim was to form a small firm that focused only on their practice areas — "commercial litigation for me and for Ed, white collar," Bennett said.

"We wanted to really focus on our practice areas, have a lot of fun practicing law and get some good results," Bennett said. "We also wanted to take cases that get to trial, which can be difficult in this day and age."

Dowd served for six years as U.S. attorney for the Eastern District of Missouri, and he now has a practice centered on white collar work, Bennett said. Early in his legal career, Bennett served as a clerk to then-U.S. Supreme Court Justice Anthony Kennedy.

The firm's attorneys include a long list of former prosecutors, public servants and judicial law clerks, and it has represented well-known names like Walmart Inc., Bayer Corp., Valero Energy, Emerson Electric, Anheuser-Busch, Fresenius Medical Care, Ernst & Young and Edward D. Jones & Co. LP, according to the firm's website.

In its latest expansion in the Lone Star State, Dowd Bennett brought on Dallas trial attorney Ben A. Barnes as a partner. Barnes previously practiced with Kirkland & Ellis LLP, and his arrival came about a month after the firm opened a Chicago shop with partner Michelle Nasser at the helm.

In addition to St. Louis, Chicago and Dallas, the firm has offices in Boston and Denver.

Bennett said the office openings are more about the partners helping them than about having a flag planted in a particular location.



James Bennett

"We have never merged or brought in a practice group from outside," Bennett said. "Our growth has been organic, with one lawyer coming onboard at a time."

Law360 Pulse recently caught up with Bennett to discuss the firm's growth and future. This interview has been edited for length and clarity.

The firm opened offices this year in Chicago and Dallas. Can you talk about those expansions?

Our approach is to open physical offices with people we know and like. We didn't plan to open locations back to back, but that's how the timing worked out.

Chicago managing partner Michelle Nasser joined the firm in 2016 after having served as an assistant U.S. attorney in Illinois and coming to her hometown of St. Louis for family reasons. She wanted to grow her practice back in Chicago, where she had a lot of cases, and we are supportive of her goals there. Our firm has a lot of important cases in Chicago, and Michelle reached the stage that her practice there was really growing and doing well. We decided it was important both for her development and the firm's development to let her open an office in Chicago.

We're not going to other cities looking for people we don't know. In Dallas, where we launched this month, it was Ben Barnes, a lawyer we've known for a long time, that drove the decision. He is a law school classmate and close friend of one of our partners who we've worked with before. When he expressed an interest in a different, smaller environment, we were excited and happy to support that.

I don't think we would have opened new offices without having confidence that people are in the location best suited for them, where they know their way around the courts. We wouldn't have just picked somebody from St. Louis and sent them to Dallas.

We've also had great success with our Denver office, which was the first time we did something like this. Matt Johnson opened that office in 2018 — we had worked extensively with him every time we had a case in Denver. We now have three lawyers and support staff and a very nice office in Denver.

We had such a good experience in Denver that we decided to try it again in Chicago and Dallas. It really was more about timing than a decision that we needed to open other offices. It's the right people at the right time in their careers.

We started in 2006 with four people. We have never merged or brought in a practice group from outside. Our growth has been organic, with one lawyer coming onboard at a time.

What do you think it is about Dowd Bennett that has attracted so many talented lawyers?

I think it may be our focus on litigation, the size and scale of the cases we handle. We've been really lucky with great client relationships. We're small and nimble, and people enjoy practicing here.

We're not trying to be all things to all clients, and we're not trying to be full-service. We have a specific niche, and sometimes people who've practiced at firms that are more general find it attractive to be at a place that's focused on their practice area. I do think it's our single focus on litigation and our devotion and dedication to both serving our clients in the way they want to be served while also strongly supporting the development and growth of our lawyers that brings attorneys here.

What is your approach to client service?

Our firm generally represents only one client in a particular industry. So for example, we have a client in the oil and gas sector, but only one; we have work in healthcare, but for only one client. We're really interested in diversity of practice, but are careful to be available to our clients in whatever case they may have.

We're pretty cautious about expanding our client base in ways that might create conflicts. We have a tremendous amount of loyalty built up with our clients, and we want to keep it that way. We have clients who hire us on one case and then come back to us with their next case. Once we have this kind of deep relationship with a client, we're not going to do anything that would interfere with that. That kind of one-client approach would be impossible at a bigger law firm.

What are the firm's plans for growth?

We've never had a growth goal or a strategic growth plan, except to make sure we are ready and in a position to grow when it makes sense for our clients, for the firm and for the lawyers. We've been asked to take a lead role at trial in cases around the country, and the cases have been of increasing complexity as we've grown to meet the needs of our clients. We've let the firm grow naturally, organically and when it makes sense.

--Editing by Alanna Weissman.