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New Montgomery McCracken Chair Aims to Build Next Generation With Non-Big Law Identity

Richard Simins rejoined Montgomery McCracken three years ago, after 16 years at a larger firm, and now he's the new chair.

BY LIZZY MCLELLAN

Special to the Legal

In electing a new leader, Montgomery McCracken Walker & Rhoads has tapped a lawyer who left the firm and decided to come back as a lateral three years ago.

Richard Simins has been elected chairman of the Philadelphia-based midsize firm, effective Thursday. He takes over for Louis Petroni, who has been chairman of the firm since 2016.

The firm also elected two partners as new management committee members—labor and employment vice chair William Kennedy and **intellectual property department** chair Alfred Zaher. They join existing committee members Petroni and Simins, as well as Frank Chernak, Steven Pachman, John Papianou, Richard Placey and Paul Zoubek.

Simins has served as the firm's vice chair and executive partner since 2018. He first joined Montgomery McCracken in 1989.



Richard Simins, at Montgomery McCracken Walker & Rhoads.

He left in 2001 for Buchanan Ingersoll & Rooney, then rejoined Montgomery McCracken in 2017.

Three years ago, Simins said, he had no intention of becoming part of firm leadership, let alone chairman. “I had avoided management for 30 years in the practice of law,” he joked. But Petroni asked him to take on the vice chair job two years ago.

“I didn’t realize that it would lead ultimately to my being chairman,” Simins said.

Petroni said the firm votes every two years on who will be chair, and it was clear already before this year’s vote that Simins would be taking the lead. In their previous roles, Simins had taken on the responsibilities of a managing partner, he said.

“Not only I but the firm recognized the talent and how effective Rick was in his role as vice president and executive partner,” Petroni said. “He just had the right instincts in terms of growing the



Lou Petroni of Montgomery McCracken Walker & Rhoads

firm, identifying strategic opportunities.”

Simins was the first in a string of former Montgomery McCracken partners to return to the firm over the course of about two years after moving to other law firms. He said for some of them—commercial litigator **Stephen Rhoads** and labor and employment pair **Frank Chernak and Kennedy**, the latter of whom is now on the management committee—it was his own return that sparked the conversation about coming back.

He also noted that partner Fabiana Pierre-Louis returned to the firm last year after working as a federal prosecutor, and employment lawyer Carmon Popler returned from LeClairRyan in 2018.

Also in the past two years, the firm launched its IP department with a group from Buchanan and **brought on** a group of six in New York and Delaware from struggling firm CKR Law.

But it has also seen some significant losses. A group of **seven lawyers left** in September 2018 to launch the Philadelphia office of Armstrong Teasdale, including former Montgomery McCracken chairman Richard Scheff. And just a few months later, a group of New York lawyers followed Scheff to Armstrong Teasdale, **launching another office** there for the Am Law 200 firm.

But Simins said the Big Law approach is decidedly not Montgomery McCracken’s aim.

“We’ve developed this identity as a firm in the last couple years as a sort of nimble, entrepreneurial big firm place where we do big firm work, but where lawyers can come and not have to live in a big firm culture,” Simins said, adding that such an atmosphere has been attractive to young lawyers in particular.

He acknowledged that in developing that persona, Montgomery McCracken took a different path from many of the Philadelphia firms it once counted as peers.

“Firms that were peer firms when I started practicing law in 1989 ... have gone on to become national firms,” Simins said. “We’re an old, traditional brand of Philadelphia law firm, but we have this new energy, and we’re in a niche now.”

Moving forward, Simins said he wants to improve diversity at the firm. Already, as vice chair, he created the role of chief diversity

and inclusion officer, which is held by Zaher, who is now also a management committee member. He acknowledged that the management committee does not currently include any women.

“We definitely hope to change that,” he said. “We are committed to being as diverse as possible, and we are extremely committed to promoting women.”

Creating a positive work environment for young lawyers is another priority, he said, including promoting a balanced lifestyle, which comes back to the firm’s decidedly non-Big Law culture.

“I tell my associates, when you go home at night, turn your phone off for three hours,” Simins said. “For young associates coming up who only have to be available to partners, we stress that they should learn now how to manage the stress of being a lawyer.”

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