



From the Physics Lab to the Courtroom

by Stephanie Potter

“He’s just a genuinely nice guy, very bright. He’s not someone who’s going to be very boastful, even though he has a lot to boast about. I liked him immediately and still do.”

Oddly enough, Gary M. Ropski’s career as a top intellectual property litigator began with a speech from President John F. Kennedy.

It was May 1961, in the thick of the Space Race, and Kennedy vowed to put a man on the moon by the end of the decade. It left an indelible mark on the then 9-year-old Ropski, who was interested in science.

Ropski, who grew up in Erie, Penn., decided to pursue a physics degree at Carnegie Mellon University. But by 1969, the U.S. had fulfilled its goal and the job market for physics graduates had begun to dry up. Ropski had a conversation with a college counselor who suggested he consider becoming a patent attorney.

The idea stuck with Ropski during a post-college stint at General Electric Corporation, where he completed a manufacturing management training program in the Transportation Systems Business Division. Ropski spent time with one of the company’s patent lawyers and eventually decided to pursue a legal career.

After graduating from Northwestern University School of Law in 1976, he joined the firm then known as Hume, Clement, Brinks, William, Olds & Cook. He’s been there ever since, and was recently elected president of Brinks Hofer Gilson & Lione.

Ropski, 53, said that kind of loyalty to a firm isn’t unusual at Brinks Hofer. But he thinks it reflects a difference in the way young lawyers looked at their careers 30 years ago as opposed to now.

“My generation was the generation where you went to a law firm, worked hard to become partner, and when you became partner that was the place that you stayed,” Ropski said.

Ropski said the people make Brinks Hofer special, and the firm is the kind of place where attorneys don’t put their personal success first. He encourages young lawyers to look at their career the same way he did.

“The more time you spend at a firm the more you can get involved in managing the successes of the firm and the future of the firm,” Ropski said.

Leading Lawyers Network

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Ropski said his background in physics has been invaluable as it gave him a basic knowledge that he can apply to different technologies.

"My job in large measure is being a translator," Ropski said.

Also invaluable is his wife, Barbara Schleck, a former journalist and retired executive director of Cook County Court Watchers.

"She is someone with whom I often talk about my cases and my presentation," Ropski said. "The nice thing of it is Barbara does not think in the cryptic terms of a lawyer."

Among his significant cases, Ropski cites a January decision by an administrative law judge for the U.S. International Trade Commission in an enforcement proceeding regarding a patent related to sophisticated automated mechanical truck transmissions. The judge found Ropski's clients, ZF Friedrichshafen and ArvinMeritor Inc., had redesigned the system in a way that did not infringe on the patent. The judge denied a request to assess more than \$40 million in penalties. Ropski said he believes it to be the first time in the 75-year history of the ITC's Section 337 investigations that a judge ruled in favor of the alleged patent infringer in an enforcement proceeding.

"What it says is that our clients did the redesign in the right way with the right results," Ropski said. "It lays out a proper course of conduct for future alleged infringers."

Ropski also is involved in an ongoing case in which he represents the

Japanese-based Alpine Electronics in a lawsuit brought by Encyclopedia Britannica over the patent the encyclopedia company has for the technology used in electronic, computer-based encyclopedias. The patent, Ropski said, involves text and graphics searches and text browsing. The encyclopedia company contends it should be interpreted to cover the technology used by the navigation systems such as those made by Alpine.

A client, M. Lee Murrah, chief intellectual property counsel for ArvinMeritor Inc., praised Ropski for his concise thinking and ability to be responsive to the company's business needs.

James E. Laramy, vice president and general counsel for another client, DST Systems Inc., a service provider for the finance and banking industry, said he has known Ropski since law school.

His company uses Brinks Hofer for its trademark, copyright and patent issues. He described Ropski as meticulous in everything from client relations all the way to the smallest detail of the way his computer is set up. He praised Ropski for his skill in strategic thinking and in evaluating the quality of claims.

"I think he's played a major role in creating and sustaining a law firm that can do anything in the field of intellectual property," Laramy said. "It's a real resource."

The immediate past president of the Brinks Hofer, shareholder Jerold A. Jacover, recalled going to lunch with

Ropski when the young lawyer was considering joining the firm. He said Ropski has not changed much over the years.

“He’s just a genuinely nice guy, very bright,” Jacover said. “He’s not someone who’s going to be very boastful, even though he has a lot to boast about. I liked him immediately and still do.”

Jacover said the future of the firm is in good hands with Ropski. He noted that Ropski is well-traveled and comfortable with dealing with people from other countries, something that serves him well in international cases. Among the issues facing the future of the field, Ropski cited intellectually property asset management and intellectually property litigation cost control. As to the first issue, Ropski says companies have begun to look at patents as assets they can sell or license. As to the second, Ropski said that as IP litigation increases, businesses are looking for ways to stop infringers in a cost-effective manner, meaning that the firm has become a partner in cost-containment strategies with its customers.

Among his priorities for the future of the firm, Ropski said he is committed to increasing diversity and making the firm look more like the community it serves. An avid athlete, Ropski also has started a wellness initiative at the firm.

In his spare time, Ropski enjoys biking, squash, yoga, sailing and travel. He and his wife have climbed Mount Kilimanjaro and he was days away from a trip to Libya to see a total eclipse of the sun at the time of this interview. His interest in astronomy is such that the

firm gave him a telescope to celebrate his 25th anniversary with Brinks Hofer.

Friends describe Ropski as relentlessly upbeat, energetic and adventurous. A law school classmate, Wm. Carlisle Herbert, said Ropski approaches his hobbies with the same vigor as his job. Another classmate, Marvin A. Tenenbaum, said Ropski’s friends are amazed by how he finds the time for his career, travels and hobbies.

“We marvel at it,” Tenenbaum said. “We wonder where his mind is going. I don’t like climbing stairs, much less mountains.”

Herbert said Ropski and Schleck walked the stairwells of the Aon Center, formerly known as the Amoco Building, in order to prepare for a mountain climbing trip.

“When he engages in these activities, he employs the same kind of preparation that one requires in the practice of law,” Herbert said. “It’s not a vicarious interest in things. It’s getting in and doing things.”

Herbert said friends of Ropski remark that his appearance and outlook on life is little changed since college.

“There’s nothing world-weary about him in the slightest.”

Leading Lawyers Network

TOP TEN

Leading Business Lawyers in Illinois based upon the surveys conducted by Leading Lawyers Network

- | | |
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| 1 Dan K. Webb <i>Winston & Strawn LLP</i> Chicago | 6 Fred H. Bartlit, Jr. <i>Bartlit Beck Herman Palenchar & Scott LLP</i> Chicago |
| 2 James H. M. Sprayregen <i>Kirkland & Ellis LLP</i> Chicago | 7 C. Barry Montgomery <i>Williams Montgomery & John Ltd</i> Chicago |
| 3 Philip S. Beck <i>Bartlit Beck Herman Palenchar & Scott LLP</i> Chicago | 8 Gary M. Ropski <i>Brinks Hofer Gilson & Lione</i> Chicago |
| 4 Jack S. Levin <i>Kirkland & Ellis LLP</i> Chicago | 9 Kevin M. Forde <i>Kevin M. Forde Ltd</i> Chicago |
| 5 Jerold S. Solovy <i>Jenner & Block LLP</i> Chicago | 10 William J. Harte <i>William J. Harte Ltd</i> Chicago |

Brinks Hofer Gilson & Lione's Leading Lawyers

**These Lawyers were recommended by their peers as
Leading Intellectual Property Lawyers.**

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|--------------------|----------------------|------------------------|
| Glen P. Belvis | Jerome Gilson | Robert S. Mallin |
| Joel W. Benson | Raymond W. Green | Laura Beth Miller |
| Jack C. Berenzweig | Jeffery A. Handelman | Michael E. Milz |
| Rodney A. Daniel | Roy E. Hofer | James P. Naughton |
| Timothy Q. Delaney | Cynthia A. Homan | G. Peter Nichols |
| Jeffery M. Duncan | Jerold A. Jacover | William F. Prendergast |
| Thomas J. Filarski | Harold V. Johnson | Gary M. Ropski |
| David S. Fleming | Richard A. Kaplan | Steven P. Shurtz |
| William H. Frankel | Bradley G. Lane | Gustavo Siller, Jr. |
| John C. Freeman | Richard G. Lione | James R. Sobieraj |
| Ralph J. Gabric | John K. Lucas | Dominic P. Zanfardino |