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Litigation Leaders: Steven Geise of Jones Day on What the 'One Firm' Approach Means to Litigators

By Ross Todd

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Welcome to another edition of our Litigation Leaders series, featuring the litigation practice leaders at some of the biggest and most innovative law firms in the country.

*Meet **Steven Geise**, who co-leads the business & tort litigation practice at **Jones Day** alongside partner **John Majoras**. Geise previously served as a leader in the firm's San Diego office for more than a decade.*

Geise is from Olean, New York, a small town near the Pennsylvania border. He says his small town roots have helped him connect with jurors in places such as Pikeville, Kentucky, where he tried an insurance recovery case in 2023 for client Celgene. After that trial, Geise said, one of the jurors gave him one of the kindest compliments he's received, telling local counsel: "We knew Mr. Geise wasn't from here, but he could have been."

Below, Geise discusses what he learned from his parents and grandparents and driving a forklift, why Jones Day litigators try to avoid "echo chambers," and how a deep trial bench allows the firm to handle multiple trials simultaneously.

The following has been edited for length and clarity.

Lit Daily: Tell us a bit about yourself—perhaps a thing or two your partners don't know about you.

Steve Geise: I think a lot of folks do realize I grew up in Western New York, and that's probably because they know that I'm a Bills fan. It's hard to describe exactly how small the town was. I'm sure there were lawyers in town, but my family didn't know any of them if they existed.



Courtesy photo

Steven N. Geise of Jones Day.

My role models were my parents and my grandparents, none of whom attended college at all. So we were kind of a higher education deficient family, you could say. But the things I learned from my parents and my grandparents—like do your job, be on time, respect other people's time, help your neighbor out, treat people fairly—are things that I found have come in handy as a lawyer.

This is something probably people don't know: I had two jobs in high school and college. One, I worked as a busboy at a small restaurant when I was in high school, and then in high school

and college in the summer I drove a forklift at a warehouse, midnight to 8:30—not ideal hours for somebody enjoying their summer during college. But I think between my parents and some of their values and what I learned driving a forklift, it really impressed upon me the importance of being a good teammate, the importance of how you help and treat people, and then how you work together to solve problems.

As I decided to go to law school and become a lawyer, I think some of those same attributes—separate from the law part of it—really have come in handy. Now when I'm lucky enough to get to go to trial and try a case in front of a jury, when I stand in front of the jurors, I think to myself: "These are my people. These are my parents. These are the guys I drove a forklift with. What would make them care about the outcome of this case?"

You spent years leading the San Diego office at Jones Day before taking on responsibility for the business & tort litigation practice. What parts of office leadership translated naturally to the more practice wide role that you have now?

I was lucky enough for 12 years to either be the administrative partner or the partner-in-charge of the San Diego office. **Joe Sims**, who was a legendary antitrust lawyer at Jones Day, and was our first partner-in-charge of the California region, used to say that these administrative roles are a night job. You also have a day job. And I think sometimes you do the night job during the day.

But what I found in those roles in San Diego is it really was a blessing to have those positions because you get to learn more about your colleagues, you get to learn more about the clients and you get to learn a lot more about the firm. It was on a smaller scale in the office setting. But I think that has helped me in the new role because even though we have business and tort lawyers in 18 offices across the states, it's still the same approach. You need to take the time to get to know your colleagues, get to know what they're doing, get to know the clients they're working for.

So, I think having that role in San Diego hopefully has equipped me to get involved and get to know people throughout the firm in a way that we have a personal relationship, so they feel like they can come to me if they need something, if they need support on staffing a matter, or how to approach a client, or if they're having a difficult time with something.

When I connected with Stephanie Parker and Jay Tambe back in 2021, the firm had more than 1,100 litigation lawyers around the globe. How big is your litigation department now?

I think that number is still accurate. If you look at folks in the litigation or dispute practices, we have lawyers in all 40 offices around the globe. When you put all of those different practices together, you're still over 1,100.

For business and tort litigation in particular, we have right about 400. The split is roughly 150 partners and of counsel and 250 associates throughout the United States. We have a pretty broad geographic reach.

How do you maintain an active practice while leading a group of this size? Are there parts of your client work you have to surrender to make it work?

Sometimes it's like Joe Sims said: You have a night job. You have a day job. And the day job is still very important. So, I am fortunate enough to still be really busy with an active practice with clients who trust me on their matters. So it's a mix of nights and weekends to try to make sure you get all the client work done and the administrative work done. There's a little bit of a scaling back in the terms of billable hours. But I just try to be a little more efficient with the time. And frankly, we have such good teams here that you can rely on other people to do things that maybe you know five to 10 years ago I would want to do myself.

How do you and John Majoras divide the leadership responsibilities for the practice, and where do you work together?

John and I are in pretty close communication. It's interesting: When I came to Jones Day 30 years ago, I interviewed with John. He was one of the folks I met that first day. So I've known John for 30 years, and it's an incredible gift and fun to get to work with him leading the practice.

On a lot of things, we collaborate. There are certain things where we have distinct roles,

but on things like associate and partner evaluations we work very closely together. It's a collaborative process.

So this structure, with business and tort litigation sitting within a broader disputes practice, is one the firm has had for a while. What's the thinking behind that structure rather than having one person sitting atop all of the litigators?

I think if we didn't work so well together, you might need one person sitting on top of everything. But "One Firm Worldwide" is our motto, and it is true. It is a rare matter that is staffed with only one practice. Typically, on our big litigation matters, we'll have people from business & tort litigation, issues and appeals, insurance recovery and global disputes. There's so much collaboration among the practices that we don't need that one person to make sure it happens. It's part of our DNA.

What do you see as the hallmark of Jones Day litigators? What makes you different?

On the one hand, it is teamwork and it's teamwork in multiple ways. We staff matters across offices. It's not an insular thing. If something comes into me in San Diego, I'm not going to staff it with just people in San Diego. We find the best people across the firm to be on that matter, whether they're in Minneapolis or Miami.

Then I think within our teams we do value all viewpoints. We try to avoid having echo chambers. We try to check our egos at the door. Obviously, any litigator has an ego, but if you think the way you're approaching a problem or a case or a trial is the only way to approach it, you're wrong. If you're open to feedback from everybody on your team, it's just going to make the entire performance better. I think we do that within a specific team, but also across practices. It's bringing in the issues and appeals folks. It's bringing in the state attorney general folks. It's bringing in the IP people. It's bringing in labor and employment if there's a trade secret or employee mobility matter. So, it really is the teamwork across the offices, within the teams themselves, and across the practices that I think sets us apart.

I have friends and colleagues at other firms who are fantastic lawyers. It's just not as natural at those places to do what we do on a daily basis.

Then I think the other thing is just our trial experience and success sets us apart. In the last 10 years, we've had over 250 jury trials as a firm, which is an incredible number. A lot of those are in the product liability space, but a lot are in other spaces as well. Just having that many people with trial experience, whether it's being a first chair, a second chair, or just going to court every day and seeing what happens, working with witnesses, preparing outlines—it's just a huge advantage to have that actual, hands-on trial experience. It helps you not only for future trials, but it helps you to develop and prepare cases leading up to trial. If a case is going to settle, you are probably in a better settlement posture because you knew how to litigate the case with trial in mind.

In what three areas of litigation do you have the deepest bench? I know it's difficult, but please name just three.

I will stick to the business and tort practice. It'll help me narrow it down to just three.

One is the product liability/mass tort area. I think we're unparalleled there. We have experience in pretty much anything that's in an MDL or a mass tort that's out there.

I think we are as strong as any firm in the country in construction litigation. In many firms, they would be a standalone practice. They could certainly be that here, but we have a tremendous group of construction litigators across the country: **Dan McMillan** in Los Angeles, **Larry Dany** in New York and a collection of folks in Miami and Texas. I think it is a real strength of ours.

And then the third one I would say, and this kind of infringes a little bit on the antitrust practice, but within business and tort litigation, we have a number of fantastic antitrust litigators. John Majoras, who I mentioned before, is one. That's his primary area practice. **David Kiernan** is another. I think we are involved in so many high-level antitrust cases right now that it's a real focus and real strength.

So, what does the firm's coming trial docket look like? Is that pace going to continue?

From the charts and lists we look at, I think we have 16 matters set for trial or arbitration between

now and January. So we'll be pretty busy. We have several trials coming up for Daikin in the PFAS litigation and for Chevron in the Paraquat litigation. We have another consolidated trial in Cook County for R.J. Reynolds, a patent infringement trial for Motorola and an arbitration matter for Matthews International against Tesla. So we're going to be busy with trials and arbitrations over the next five or six months.

In situations like Daikin and Chevron, where you have multiple trials stacking up and the same trial team may not be able to handle all of them, are you preparing together as a group or in parallel?

Both. It depends on the matter. For instance, in Chevron, we've had a team that's been ready to try a case any time this year. We were fortunate enough to get summary judgment in a case that was set for trial in Philadelphia. What we've been planning is to have a full team deployed for the first trial, and then have a number of people with experience, then kind of be able to divide and conquer with subsequent trials, either if they're on the heels of another one or cases that get set at the same time.

This is where it's helpful to have people with a lot of trial experience. The bench is pretty deep, and it's not like we just run out one person that's got to try everything. We have a number of people who are capable of first chairing a trial. If we have that many trials, we'll be fortunate enough to staff them all.

Is that really the firm's sweet spot, at least for the business and tort practice: matters of the size and scope where multiple cases may be going to trial simultaneously or in rapid succession?

I think it is. Historically, our representation of R.J. Reynolds has been the best example of that. There were times where we would have over 20 trials in a year for R.J. Reynolds. So it was multiple different trial teams, multiple different first-chair trial lawyers, and it was not unusual to have multiple trials going on at the same time. Sometimes in the very same courthouse. So I think we got used to that cadence. We can do that. A lot of times clients want particular people to try the case for them. So that's when we try to hopefully get the courts to accommodate different conflicts. But when push comes to shove, we can staff a top-notch team in multiple jurisdictions at the same time.

Is there anything that we didn't touch on that you were hoping to, or that we should?

We covered a lot of stuff. But one of the things that this series asks a lot of times is about lateral partners and growing the practice. I mentioned one of the strong suits for the practice is product liability and mass torts. I think one of the things we've done in the last year-plus attracted people globally that are experts in that practice. **Phil Pfeffer** joined us in New York with a significant amount of experience from his time over in England. We added **Sam Silver** and **Nathalie Smyth** in London, who have a lot of products experience, and then we added **Christine Tran** in Australia with a similar background.

One of the things we see is mass torts expanding beyond the borders of the United States. Working with some of our global disputes people, I think that's an area where we have seen some focus from our lateral hiring.

Then a lot of our growth is really up through the ranks: Last year, I think there were 16 disputes or litigation partners made at the firm, and seven of them were in the business and tort litigation practice. So, a pretty sizable number there. I think there's a constant attention on developing the next generation of trial lawyers and litigators. Seeing those people come up through the ranks as associates and become partners is pretty rewarding for people like myself as I get older.

Correction: An earlier version misstated the client Geise represented in the trial in Pikeville, Kentucky. He represented Celgene against Humana.

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