

## MARC ANSEL

### Nourishing the ‘High Caliber’ of Downstate Litigation

by Dan Rafter

CHAMPAIGN—When he was 25, Marc J. Ansel and buddies from the University of Illinois Law School in Urbana-Champaign started a firm in their college town. He expected the venture to survive for about a year, at which point, he’d come to his senses and practice in Chicago.

momentous decision about law firm advertising. Second, Ansel eventually did indeed go to Chicago—and didn’t like it. After about nine months, he returned to Champaign, where today he operates **Ansel Law**.

More than three decades since he started

of the state’s top civil litigation attorneys.

“I enjoy the opportunity to use the system to help people,” he says. “And there’s often the chance to be an equalizer between the big and the small. I think that over my career, I have been that equalizer. Being a trial lawyer allows you to represent a party against, in some cases, a bigger interest. You can force those bigger interests to explain and defend themselves, answer for themselves, within the system. And not only can I represent a smaller interest against a bigger one, but I also help the larger clients by bringing understanding and resolving their issues in the most efficient and expeditious manner.”

And he relishes doing all this from his Champaign base. During his brief time practicing in Chicago, the Chicago native realized that he’d made a name for himself in Champaign, where the quality of practice, he says, is “much more superior, more to my liking. High caliber.”

“I’m a Chicago boy,” Ansel acknowledges. But he’ll go there, as he puts it, “only to have fun.”

#### **Young Firm Places Advertisement**

Ansel and friends had safety nets when they opened Ansel, Eisenberg and Marsh after graduating from law school in 1974: Each was married to a working wife. “We could at least have food on the table,” he jokes now.

With support from a small segment of the legal community and their own service-based drive to succeed, the little firm did well. Then, a Supreme Court ruling came down, and things changed even more for the better.

Just months after Ansel’s firm started, the high court declared that forbidding lawyers the right to advertise violates their First Amendment rights. Considered by some in the legal community a distasteful practice, advertising suddenly became available to others, like Ansel, who would take advantage of the opportunity.

So Ansel, Eisenberg & Marsh bought a “teeny little ad,” probably costing around \$150, to run in want ads of the *News-Gazette*. Another lawyer with slightly more name recognition—one Dan Walker, former governor of Illinois—did the same. A reporter who covered the legal beat for the *News-Gazette* noticed the emerging trend and wrote an article that ran on page 3 of the paper.



But a few funny things happened on the way to his career.

First, shortly after Ansel and friends Arnee J. Eisenberg and Roger A Marsh opened their doors in 1974, the Supreme Court made a

practicing law, Ansel still never grows tired of arguing cases in front of juries and judges. His practice has taken him to the sanctum of the U.S. Supreme Court in Washington, a case he’ll never forget. Colleagues describe him as one

The headline? “Local Young Law Corporation Places Advertisement.” Ansel’s firm’s ad enjoyed even more exposure, appearing with the article itself. And, while phones didn’t ring off the hook immediately, ring they did in weeks to come. Business picked up.

“Not only was it because of the newspaper article, but people were talking about it,” Ansel recalls. “As I look back at this now, I think...Dan Walker’s ad was viewed negatively; you could assume that ours would be too—except that we are called a ‘young law firm.’ It’s not as though there were clients we were going to offend. We didn’t have any clients.”

That, of course, would change.

“We were able and get going and be self-supporting and successful, to my amazement and to my pleasure,” he says, adding: “Bottom line: We succeeded with the help of a few kind and generous lawyers, and working hard, and providing good service, and getting the word out.”

Eventually, the partners decided that they could either remain business partners or friends, so they dissolved the partnership and remained friends. Ansel worked with other firms, including that short stint in Chicago and the return to Champaign.

After 28 years in partnerships with other attorneys, Ansel founded Ansel Law in May 2009.

Today, Ansel Law ranks as a fairly small firm. He has two associates working with him in the office. Ansel prefers a firm of this size. It gives him the freedom to build and maintain a legal career that best suits his personality.

“There were a number of things that I wanted to do with my practice,” Ansel says. “I particularly had some ideas in the area of technology that I was able to do more easily on my own in a small firm. Today, I am able to handle large and complex cases as a small specialty firm that specializes in business and commercial litigation. People come to me when they have a specific need that they know I can meet.”

It’s a sign of success when much of an attorney’s workload comes from referrals by other lawyers. That is the case for Ansel Law, and Ansel’s proud of that.

“Lawyers refer cases to me when they want their clients to have the highest representation in litigation cases,” Ansel says. “I think it is one of the highest honors that a lawyer can achieve, this respect from the fellow members of the bar. The attorneys who refer cases to me can know that their clients will have quality representation in handling complicated litigation.”

Ansel admits that thriving as an attorney does have challenges, mostly due to the amount of time it takes to be successful.

“The law is a jealous mistress,” he says. “And serving the needs of the clients and the system in the highest manner requires a huge commitment of time and effort.”

### Arguing with Conviction

Fellow attorneys recognize that Ansel has long been a tireless advocate for his clients, someone who will spend long hours preparing cases and crafting arguments to help clients receive the best results.



Ansel and wife, Fran, at the 2010 “Border Wars” football game between Illinois and Missouri.

Ansel excels, too, once cases reach the courtroom, his peers say. No one argues a case with more conviction than he does.

A partner attorney with Champaign-based Chapin and Long, Richard Chapin has known Ansel for decades. He’s also faced off against Ansel in the courtroom twice. In one case, Chapin’s client received a favorable result; in the other, Ansel’s client did.

In both cases, Ansel was a formidable opponent, Chapin says.

“What impressed me about Marc was his textbook ability in terms of gathering evidence and questioning witnesses,” Chapin recalls. “He puts on a textbook trial. He knows what is required. He knows how to best argue for his clients. He does everything he can to achieve the best results for his clients, but he is never underhanded. He will never backdoor you with something. He is a true professional and a true advocate for his clients.”

Ansel has earned the respect of his peers

outside his law office and the courtroom, too. Chapin and Ansel, for instance, meet for lunch three to four times a year. During these meetings, the conversation strays from music to travel to books, interests that the two men hold in common.

“I enjoy chatting with Marc about personal issues. At the same time, I don’t ever fear that a personal relationship will compromise the representation we give to our clients if we should ever oppose each other in a case,”

Chapin says. “Marc doesn’t operate that way. He always does a professional job. He is able to maintain a personal relationship and a professional one at the same time.”

### In Front of the Supreme Court

These relationships and his sterling reputation have served Ansel well since he started his career. It didn’t even take Ansel that long to reach what most attorneys would consider a career pinnacle: an appearance before the U.S. Supreme Court.

Ansel reached that level in 1983, when he represented a teacher who claimed his school board fired him unfairly.

Ansel has never forgotten the thrill of that case. Arguing before the Supreme Court is like dreaming of hitting a game-winning homerun in the World Series. Most people only dream about it. They don’t get to live it. Ansel did.

Ansel’s Supreme Court case centered on whether the local school board could break an

oral promise of employment. In the case, the school board promised the teacher that he would have at least two years of work, then let him go after just one year.

Ansel and his legal team successfully argued the teacher's case before a trial court and an appellate court. The school district challenged the ruling, and the case ended up before the Supreme Court.

"What trial lawyer doesn't dream of that, appearing before the U.S. Supreme Court?" Ansel asks. "That is a dream. But it's certainly not an expectation."

On the date of the argument, Supreme Court Justice Thurgood Marshall had fallen ill and was unavailable to rule on the matter. The court split 4-4. This meant that the lower-court ruling, which favored Ansel's client, held up. Ansel and his team had won.

What would have happened had Marshall not been ill? No one knows. The result, though a bit murky because of the knotted ruling, still ranks as a highlight of his career.

"I always figure I should just simply say that I won my Supreme Court case and not get into too many details," Ansel laughs. "But I did take a case to the U.S. Supreme Court and I won. That is true. It doesn't matter how you get that win."

Arguing before the U.S. Supreme Court, of course, was far from an easy task. Ansel and his team even faced pressure from powerful teachers unions and associations whose officials suggested that the Champaign lawyers might want to step down from the case. These associations wondered if some bigger legal names might be more appropriate for such a high-profile legal battle.

Though aware of the pressure that naturally comes with appearing before the Supreme Court, Ansel says he never doubted his ability to provide his client with the best possible legal representation.

"It was an amazing experience. I'll never forget it," Ansel says. "And there was some incredible pressure placed on us. When you get a case that goes that high up, that pressure comes. We had filings on behalf of national associations on both sides of the case. I can't remember how many mock arguments we went through to prepare ourselves for this case. It was simply an incredible time."

#### 'Epitome of a Professional'

Ansel's fellow attorneys aren't surprised at his success. Ansel doesn't leave matters to chance, they say. He works so hard and researches so thoroughly that he always gives his clients their best opportunity to achieve a favorable result. That holds true no matter how big or small a case may be.



Ansel and law school classmates (from left) Roger Marsh and Arnee Eisenberg at their 1974 graduation from the University of Illinois College of Law. The three opened a law practice in Champaign right out of law school.

"Marc has always done a fine job. He is the epitome of a professional," says Ward McDonald, who focuses on banking, real estate and commercial law with Meyer Capel, also in Champaign. "I'm never afraid to call on Marc whenever a client of mine faces commercial litigation. I never have any doubts that he will do the absolute best job that he can."

McDonald should know. He's worked with Ansel for more than two decades. Never, during these more than 20 years, has Ansel failed to impress McDonald.

"I have never had a disappointment when it comes to Marc," McDonald says. "In fact, I've been delighted by his work all these years."

Fortunately, Ansel, too, has been delighted by working in law. He says that there is no other career that would have better suited his personality.

"There are so many things I enjoy about this career," he says. "First, I do enjoy helping people work through and resolve their problems. Secondly, I enjoy the intellectual challenge of investigating the facts and applying the law. Thirdly, I enjoy playing the role of the advocate in court before judges and juries."

He also enjoys the people with whom he works, whether they are fellow attorneys, judges, juries or witnesses. He even enjoys working with his opponents in court.

In fact, Ansel counts meeting such a wide variety of people as one great benefit of a career in law. Interacting with so many people has also given him a chance to use the psychology degree he earned as an

undergraduate student at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign before he entered the school's law program.

"I think this career has given me a great and deep understanding of people," Ansel says. "It's helped me understand so much about human nature."

This hasn't stopped Ansel, though, from giving his time his alma mater. Ansel has taught in the trial advocacy program since 2001.

J. Steven Beckett, the college's director of trial advocacy, has long been surprised at how willing Ansel is to spend so much time teaching college students considering how busy the attorney's life is.

"It is amazing," Beckett says. "He has a full-time practice and the stress that goes along with that. Yet he is willing to set aside time for the future of lawyers in legal education. It's amazing to me."

Ansel's presence has been a help to the students in the university's law school, Beckett says. Ansel is never shy about sharing details of cases with his students, providing them with a glimpse of what life is like for a practicing lawyer.

"Our students are fortunate to have a skilled lawyer like Marc in the classroom," Beckett says. "We are so appreciative to have him. And I know our students' educational experience is richer thanks to his work."

Ansel doesn't view his teaching duties as just one more responsibility in an already busy life. He considers teaching as one more way to give back, to share his experiences with the future generation of legal professionals.

Besides, Ansel enjoys teaching. And many of Ansel's former students regard the trial attorney as a mentor.

"I've maintained relationships with many of the students I've taught," Ansel says. "Some still call me from time to time with questions of practical or legal issues. It really does feel good to contribute in this way, and it's always a good feeling when students remember you and keep in touch with you. It adds a dimension to teaching that makes it even more fulfilling."

Though Ansel did not grow up in this town, Urbana-Champaign has become his home today. He's seen this college town grow up. It's now, he says, an extraordinary place in which to live.

"My two friends talked me into staying in Champaign after I graduated," Ansel says.

"I almost certainly was going to leave. I almost certainly was going to go back to Chicago. But now I'm so happy that I stayed. This has become such a wonderful place to live and work. One of those friends who talked me into staying is still here, too. I am grateful to call this community my home." ■