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Banner Witcoff's President On Leadership Role, Firm Strategy

By **Adrian Cruz**

Law360 (January 30, 2023, 4:49 PM EST) -- A longtime attorney with Chicago-based Banner Witcoff has been elected president of the intellectual property firm for the second time. Janice Mitrius spoke with Law360 Pulse about her tenure at Banner Witcoff, the firm's strategy going forward, its diversity initiatives and its culture.

Mitrius, a litigation shareholder, succeeds shareholder Binal Patel, whose two-year term ended, the firm said Friday.

Mitrius, who first joined Banner Witcoff as a summer associate while at the Arizona State University's Sandra Day O'Connor College of Law, has been with the firm since 1997 and has served in a variety of leadership roles, including a previous stint as president from 2009 to 2011.

Before deciding to pursue law, Mitrius was on a mechanical engineering path. She graduated from the Illinois Institute of Technology and spent six years as a project engineer with AlliedSignal Engines, an aerospace company that merged with Honeywell in 1999.

Mitrius currently serves on Banner Witcoff's board of directors, which she rejoined in 2019 after previously serving as a director from 2005 to 2010. Outside the firm, she is a coordinator for leadership development at the American Bar Association.

"I'm honored that the board of directors and shareholders feel that I'm up to the challenge, and it's very much a vote of confidence of the people I've worked with for 26 years," she said. "It's an honor and challenge that I'm up for."

Along with Mitrius, Banner Witcoff also elected Louis DiSanto and Andy Mu to the firm's board of directors and named nine new shareholders in its Chicago and Washington, D.C., offices.

Mitrius spoke with Law360 Pulse on Monday. This interview has been edited for length and clarity.

What will your role as firm president entail and what are some of the areas of focus going forward?

As president, my role isn't just to be a part of the board of directors, but steering the ship to make sure that the initiatives we find important are being implemented.

One thing that remains a very high priority for us is our diversity, and that's an initiative that will continue.

We're also trying to figure out the landscape between balancing working from home and working from the office, trying to create more interactions and figuring out what that would look like. Right now, our policy currently dictates for attorneys and staff to come in one day per week, and we're constantly reviewing it to see if that's the right decision and if so, how do we increase in-person contact by doing it or if we need more days in the office.

Another initiative is growing our life science practice. We've made a number of lateral hires in 2022 that we're very excited about.

What are some of the firm's current diversity, equity and inclusion initiatives?

We have a committee that focuses on DEI, and they have an ambitious set of goals for this year that we're continuing from previous ones. We're trying to work within the firm to promote diversity as well as externally, and that includes engaging with other groups, having speakers come in and having discussions amongst the attorneys themselves to try and figure out how to make sure that we continue having a diverse practice.

We feel that we've done a good job. For the last six years or so, our board of directors has been at least 50% composed of diverse attorneys and almost 50% of our committees are chaired by diverse attorneys. Our attorney demographics also bear out that we've been doing a lot to focus on diversity, with over 40% of our attorneys being women or minorities. It's very much reflective of what we are as a firm and what we want to continue being.

What's the firm's recruitment strategy?

We're very deliberate in the hires we make. We do a lot of vetting, and we have people talk to attorneys in the firm, trying to make sure that people we bring on as laterals are good fits because we want everyone we hire to stay long term. We're not looking to hire someone and think they'll only be here for three to five years.

What about the firm keeps people around long term?

If you look at the demographics of our attorneys, we have a significant portion just like me that clerked as summer associates and have been with Banner for our entire careers. I think that has a lot to do with our culture and people. We find that having people long term makes it a better place. We don't hire huge classes of new associates, but we do the hires we make with the intent that they'll be here for their entire careers.

When they see people like me who have been here for their entire careers, it does a lot for firm loyalty and maintaining our culture. The people, work and culture have made me very happy to be here, and I hope to be here for the rest of my career.

One of the things we do is avoid rash changes and decisions. It's more like steering a cruise ship as opposed to a speedboat. For the next few years, we just want to continue our focus on growing certain areas and to develop our existing relationships while avoiding those big changes, so people can be comfortable that this is somewhere they want to stay long term.

What led you to pursue a career in law after starting off as a mechanical engineer?

When I was studying engineering, I realized in my last year that I wasn't sure I really wanted to become an engineer. Many people told me that the work was much different than school, and I worked for almost six years at Allied Signal as a project engineer on gas turbine engines. And although I enjoyed the work, found it challenging and did well, it was never a passion. I could never see myself doing that for the rest of my career.

While I was figuring out what I did want to do, a friend from school became an intellectual property attorney and I felt that the combination of my engineering and science background would play well with IP law. When I went to law school and started working as a summer clerk, I knew immediately that this was what I wanted to do and that I had a passion engineering didn't give me. The transition was the best decision I ever made, and I feel that being in the legal field is my passion.

--Editing by Jill Coffey.