

**LES  
KLEIN**

## Employee Benefits Career Teeming With Serendipity

by Dustin J. Seibert



By his own admission, Leslie A. Klein's career has been a series of circumstances and happenstance that worked out for him. Klein made decisions that were based on incidents that aren't connected to other ones.

Perhaps the latest example of that is when his wife, Clarissa Cerda, took a job in Phoenix as general counsel for identity theft protection company LifeLock. It set things perfectly when Greenberg Traurig wanted Klein to move to their Phoenix office.

Klein is co-chair of the Global Benefits & Compensation Practice at Greenberg Traurig LLP. His official office is in Phoenix, but he unofficially works out of the Chicago and other offices when traveling. Telecommuting allows him to keep up with all of his clients.

"It's been really interesting to see how I got to where I am today," Klein says. "Sometimes people think that if you give credit to others, it's taking something away from you. But clearly, I recognize that these things have played a role in getting me to where I am today."

Klein is the only lawyer he's aware of who transitioned to a career as an employee benefits and executive compensation private

practitioner after serving as an IRS litigator.

Just as he's had help with his own career successes, he's made sure to help others on their paths, says former colleague Phyllis Solomon, who has used Klein in many of her positions as general counsel after they stopped working together 20 years ago.

"Les was a fantastic fountain of knowledge and a guru. He taught me so much and was generous with his time," Solomon says. "He is an expert in his field, and his thinking is so sophisticated. The problems he's resolved when I used him required deep engagement with our businesspeople and understanding facts that other lawyers did not."

### THE FAMILY BUSINESS

Klein was born in New York City and moved to Highland Park as a child. His father, Miles, moved in 1963 to run the Chicago operation of his family business, Connelly-GPM, a company related to his grandfather's invention that purified natural gas. Klein worked for the family business during summers off from Deerfield High School.

"My older brother went into the business,

and eventually my dad bought his siblings out. It wasn't really large enough for everyone to get involved," he says. "But I went to college (at University of Illinois) as an accounting major and then decided to go to law school primarily because I didn't want to work. And then, of course, in the last 40 years, I've definitely worked."

His time at the University of Illinois ultimately inspired his move to law because of the parallels between auditing and the type of law he'd be practicing.

"I liked auditing because the process was, 'What are the procedures we're putting in place to prevent someone from ripping me off?'"

"I had the accounting background, but I was probably more interested in law from having taken the business law classes. I didn't want to go to an accounting firm just to be an auditor."

Still, Klein enrolled in Chicago-Kent College of Law not knowing precisely what he wanted to do. After his second year, he completed a summer internship with the Internal Revenue Service, which he leveraged into a job with the district counsel for their Chicago office in September 1980. He admits

it's odd he took that career path despite never enjoying studying tax.

"I was doing tax litigation for the IRS, and I was doing criminal tax work, which I enjoyed," he says.

#### DEVOTED MENTOR

Klein knew for sure he wouldn't stay with the IRS past the required four-year commitment. And after about 3½ years, he received a serendipitous call from a fellow IRS lawyer.

"He asked if I was looking for a job. And I'm like, 'Wait a minute, is my phone bugged?'" he laughs. "I told him I was thinking about civil or criminal tax work, and he said, 'Tax lawyers are a dime a dozen. You want to do ERISA. Go over and talk to Roger Siske at Sonnenschein.'"

He took that advice and moved over to Sonnenschein (now Dentons), where he worked from 1984 to 2006. Perhaps his main challenge was moving into a more technical practice after years of focus on civil and criminal tax litigation.

"The first six months I had to move fast to get up to speed," he says. "I studied up, and I learned the technical aspects."

Klein's hard work paid off. He became partner in less than five years and equity partner within seven—and was one of the youngest at the firm to do so. He attributes his ascent to working with partner Siske, whom he considered a professional mentor.

"I was the new kid on the block, so a lot of stuff I'd work on in the early days was with him. He was a leader in the area, and so I got to work on pretty cutting-edge matters and learned to navigate the technical aspects from him," he says.

His relationship with Siske, who was 10 years his senior, went deeper than just the professional. They completed triathlons

together and would travel to Colorado every January to lecture about employee benefits and executive compensation in the morning and go skiing in the afternoon.

In January 2006, Roger suffered a fatal heart attack while skiing on one of their trips.

"He was one of the top employee benefits and executive compensation lawyers in country, and I was very privileged to work with him for my years at Sonnenschein," Klein says. "I was very fortunate to be able to work with a person who was a real leader in the field."

#### MOVE TO A NEW FIRM

Klein admits he never thought he'd move to another firm because, at the time, he didn't think there were many differences in firms.

"I figured I could go into consulting or go to an accounting firm and do what I was doing, but I never thought about leaving Sonnenschein to go to another firm," he says.

Klein had just moved into Siske's corner office on the 78th floor of the erstwhile Sears Tower when a Greenberg Traurig associate called him to recommend a Washington, D.C., job. A headhunter had contacted the associate, who was not qualified for the role.

Klein told the headhunter he would not move to D.C. unless his wife, Cerda, got a job in the White House again. The headhunter ultimately suggested he move to Greenberg Traurig, which sounded more feasible. Klein left Sonnenschein in 2006 after the new firm "seduced me very quickly."

"I tell my partners in Phoenix who recruit that you really have to move quickly because it's very hard to get somebody to move from one firm to another," he says. "If you're the kind of lawyer who is being head hunted, it's probably because you're a good lawyer and you're doing well."

The initial move was tough in part because he had to familiarize himself with a whole new staff of lawyers after 22 years of working with familiar faces and in part because finding new business can be daunting.

"When you move from one firm to another, you always hope your clients move with you," he says. "At the same time, I still needed to get the work done for those clients that did move over with me. But I tell (Chairman of the Chicago Office) Keith Shapiro every time I see him that it was probably the best decision I've ever made to move to Greenberg."

The 2009 transition to Phoenix was simplified by the ease with which telecommuting allows Klein to manage his clients nationwide. He says he thoroughly enjoys working for Greenberg Traurig and the way the firm treats its attorneys, old and new.

"I never thought I'd work for a large law firm because I was more of a free spirit as a youngster," he says. "I didn't want to get caught up in a big firm. Fortunately, for as large as we are, Greenberg has little bureaucracy. And they really do empower their lawyers to go out and do what's best for the firm and the clients."

#### MOST IMPORTANT RELATIONSHIP

Klein's most memorable case in his 38-year legal career occurred early on when he represented the IRS before the U.S. Tax Court in a prohibited transaction case. The IRS asserted excise taxes against the Central Conference of Teamsters as a result of the sale of its airplane to its pension fund. The case ultimately settled. He was only three years out of law school.

"I was a young kid. But it was my case, and from that point, I had established friendships and working relationships with people at the IRS and the Department of Labor that I carried with me when I went to Sonnenschein," he says.

Perhaps the most important working relationship Klein has made is the one that ultimately moved outside of the practice of law. Cerda, his wife of 15 years, can vouch for Klein's work as an attorney. She's also a former Sonnenschein partner who hired him in her capacity as general counsel of two companies.

"His experience early in his career as an IRS litigator on several high-profile employee benefit cases makes him highly strategic and effective as an adviser for anyone under investigation, audit or other form of controversy with the IRS or DOL," Cerda says.

"Les is an exceptional lawyer, with deep expertise in an area very few others understand—which makes him highly sought after by corporations, compensation committees, executives, as well as the governmental agencies that make the rules and regulations in this area themselves." ■

