

Julie Getzels: On The Art Of Working As A General Counsel

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An Active In-House Legal Recruiting Market

By Teresa Talerico

Ms. Getzels is general counsel for the Art Institute of Chicago. As such, she handles all of the legal work for the institute's museum and school, including art acquisitions, copyright questions, employee issues, nonprofit tax matters and the legalities of the museum's new building project. A 1985 graduate of Harvard Law School, her official title is Vice President, General Counsel and Secretary. One of the perks of her job is being surrounded by great works of art.

Q: What attracted you to this kind of work?

A: Two things: the variety of the practice and working for a not-for-profit.

Q: What was your background before the Art Institute?

A: After I graduated from law school, I clerked for a federal judge and then worked for a small firm that did plaintiffs' employment discrimination work. After that, I was at the U.S. Attorney's Office as a criminal prosecutor for seven years. After I left the U.S. Attorney's office, I worked in various capacities in the City of Chicago's legal department, and then went from there to a not-for-profit hospital in the University of Chicago hospital system as the general counsel. I've done a lot of different things. This is the first one that involves art or education.

Q: Combining law and art sounds neat. What's it like to combine those two

different fields?

A: It's very interesting in that when you're doing legal work, you're also learning about a field that's so different. For example, if I'm working on an acquisition of an art object, I may have to learn things about the artist or the time period in which it was made or other historical issues--for example, the possibility that the object was looted during the Holocaust. Also, my office is attached to the museum, so going back and forth to meetings, you go through these galleries of wonderful art and that's very nice.

Q: Do you have a favorite piece of "law art?"

A: No, though I do get attached to objects in that way. It's funny. When I go to exhibits, I'll think, "Oh, I know that painting. That's the one where we had a really difficult lender." I appreciate them from a very different perspective compared to the curators or visitors.

One of the things that happens at board meetings is the curators will present major new acquisitions. That's a lot of fun because you get to see the works in a very small setting and not in the galleries, so it's more personal. One of my favorite works is something that was presented at my first board meeting. I didn't realize I'd be sitting next to this great piece of art. It was a black stone bird--it sort of looks like the Maltese Falcon--from ancient Egypt. It's beautiful.

Q: What are you working on right now?

A: I'm working on some new art acquisition issues and policies. We're considering changing some of our policies. I'm working on various human resources issues and some issues related to the new building and some faculty issues. Every day, people will call me about something new. Some of them are little tiny things; some of them are great big things. I've gotten calls from people

saying, "I have a client who's about to die, he has all this great artwork. He wants to give it to you before he dies for his own tax-planning purposes; will you accept this gift?" I'm the first point of contact, so I have to get information about what the artworks are, and I have to see if the curators want them and get all of that moving.

Q: What advice do you have for students interested in such a career?

A: To be a general counsel, you need to have a fairly rounded background. You need to be familiar with a lot of different areas. When I was hiring an associate general counsel, one of the problems I found in hiring from big firms is that people were very, very specialized, and that's not what I was looking for. They were great at doing one thing, but that's not that helpful when you are working in-house. If you are interested in working in-house or as a general counsel, you have to be able to deal with a varied range of issues and range of legal work.

Another important thing is to get used to dealing with clients. That's a very hard transition to make. When you're in-house, people will just walk in all the time and there isn't the buffer of being in a firm and being outside and they have to make a phone call or they have to go through the partner or whatever. It's you. And if you don't enjoy that, you won't enjoy being in-house.

Q: How do artists and lawyers get along?

A: Mainly very well. Actually, I don't work directly with artists almost ever. We've had a few acquisitions where we're acquiring directly from the artist as opposed to a donor or art dealer or art gallery. And those sometimes can be a little tricky. But as far as dealing with people in the art world, like curators, collectors, or dealers, we each appreciate the skills and knowledge that the other person has. The curators at the museum are very open to getting legal advice. They

understand I'm here to help them make sure that when they buy a piece of art, it will stay here as opposed to being later found to be a problematic acquisition.