

Ray Koenig

A Fierce Advocate for LGBT Rights

by Dustin J. Seibert

When Raymond J. Koenig III is no longer walking the world, he'll want to be remembered less for his many accomplishments inside the courtroom and more for what he did to help make the world outside of it a better place for his daughters and for the rest of humanity.

As the managing member of the Chicago office of **Clark Hill PLC**, he has already accomplished more at the relatively tender age of 41 in trust, guardianship and estate litigation than have many attorneys with several decades more experience.

But his leadership is not limited to his work in the confines of his North Michigan Avenue office. For one, Koenig admits to having a hard time saying “no” to a coffee or lunch request from young attorneys looking for guidance — especially those in the LGBT community, of which he’s a member.

He’s also hard at work as chair of the Chicago Bar Association Leadership Development Committee, an initiative he developed with CBA Executive Director Terry Murphy and a committee of law firm leaders. The committee will have young lawyers complete a multi-month program designed to teach them “how to be leaders in every respect” within their firms and communities.

“It’s exciting and fun to develop that curriculum from scratch,” he says. “It brought together so many things I’d done and cared about in my career, including teaching, mentoring, and developing mentors.”

First Assistant Cook County State’s Attorney Daniel Kirk met Koenig about a decade ago through mutual friends. He says Koenig’s attention to the world beyond the billable hour has earned him a degree of respect in the profession normally awarded to someone much older.

“I told him he should clone himself because he’s so busy with his professional practice, but he always finds time to support the legal community, the LGBT community in Chicago and other peoples’ careers,” Kirk says. “I don’t know where he finds the time, but he does, and he does an exceptionally good job at it.”

Teacher, Lawyer or Both?

Creating the curriculum for the CBA Leadership Development Committee was a call back of sorts to Koenig’s original career



aspirations. The Metro Detroit native knew as a child he either wanted to be a teacher or a lawyer (“I had no idea what the commonalities were as a kid, but both were fascinating to me.”)

He enrolled in Michigan State University’s prestigious five-year education program and went so far as to be assigned to a school as a student teacher, which he considered a “path of no return” that would’ve made it difficult to ever attend law school. So he left the profession and took the LSAT.

“There was nothing at all about teaching that soured me to it — teachers are our heroes,” he says. “But when you get deep into something, human nature dictates that it’s very hard to change. I figured if I didn’t

try law, I’d regret it. I also figured if I didn’t like law, I could go back to teaching, though I did not know then that student loans would have prevented that.”

Though he never taught grade-school students, Koenig has done a lot of teaching in the capacity of a lawyer. In addition to the CBA curriculum, he was an adjunct professor of an Elder Law program at The John Marshall Law School using a course syllabus he co-designed from scratch and taught for three years.

“It was really gratifying because they were 7- to 12-student classes,” he says. “Everything was hands-on and reminded me why I loved teaching.”

In fact, one of the things he enjoys most about law is being able to apply elements

of teaching and education throughout his entire 16 years of practice.

“From my earliest small cases, I drew on what I learned from lesson planning and teaching,” he says. “That’s how I organized my thoughts early on and structured my cases. To some extent, I still do that.”

An Early Unfounded Fear

Though Koenig wasn’t entirely sure what type of law he wanted to practice when he enrolled in law school, he was sure what he didn’t want to do in his career: criminal defense and litigation. He turned out to be wrong.

“In hindsight, I was just afraid,” he says. “It seemed hard and like a lot of pressure. But I learned in life that if you’re afraid of something, you should confront it or you’ll always be afraid. It’s one reason I went to law school instead of teaching.”

Koenig learned through his property law and wills and trusts classes that he was interested in estate planning. However, he got his first summer job working for a criminal defense attorney whose specialty was mitigating sentences. At first, it was an eye-opening job that interested him more than trusts and estates, but it ended up being too emotionally daunting.

“It was horrifying to learn what clients went through in their lives and what helped shape them before they became convicted criminals,” he says. “It was all very eye opening, but it was too much heartache.”

Right out of law school and after working there as a law clerk, Koenig was hired as the fifth attorney for then-nascent Kerry Peck and Associates (now Peck Ritchey LLC). He started off with a number of estate planning matters but quickly learned that what interested him in law school didn’t move him in regular practice at all.

“It was boring to me,” he says. “For some people, it’s really interesting and it’s always challenging work, but I learned that sitting behind a desk planning all day wasn’t going to be me.”

Around the same time he learned he didn’t like estate planning, Koenig realized he actually loved litigating estate and trusts issues.

“I was afraid of the pressure being all on me to get it done for a client in the courtroom,” he says. “Especially in law school, you create weird images of what lawyers do: Mistakes can’t be corrected and the client’s life rests on your ability to win that motion.”

“For the most part, it’s not like that. When I figured out the best attorneys learn to recover from the mistakes, it made it easier for me,” he says.

“It’s been good for me because it taught me to face fears and use that approach

throughout my life,” he adds. “That’s what we teach our 5-year-old twins.”

Sally Sargent, head of wealth management for MB Financial Bank, says Koenig’s diverse background has armed him with a wealth of knowledge that has been incredibly beneficial for her company.

“There are certainly a lot of folks with outstanding skills and a depth of knowledge and presence in the business environment, but he hits the ball out of the park on all fronts,” she says. “He knows his stuff, and his work has been well done, timely and of the highest caliber.”

A Need for Growth

After almost a decade, Koenig left Peck Ritchey in April 2009 for Clark Hill. The move was in part a practical one, designed to help him build his practice on a larger platform.

“We had to refer out a lot of business (at Peck Ritchey), and I still do that from time to time, but now I can keep things internally to give our clients a one-stop shop,” he says.

At his age, Koenig is at least a decade and a half shy of having the senior attorney status that would allow him to reflect on



an entire career. But even now, he can say his work is, and has been, client-centric and focused on preserving the dignity of the individual at the center of his cases.

He recalls an ongoing case he started shortly after coming to Clark Hill. A company owner and family patriarch’s health declined to the point where he could no longer work. He had no feasible succession plan in place for his business.

Koenig represents one of the owner’s sons in the case; he appreciated that the son was involved purely for the good of the business and his father, not for his own gain.

“In cases like this, there’s often a child who lived off of the parents and becomes difficult,” he says. “We were retained by a son who’d done really well on his own, had nothing at stake and wasn’t involved in the business, other than making sure that his dad was OK and would live a good life without undue interference from his family.”

“It felt good to do something that worked for the dad’s best interests and not just the son’s. And it was cool to do it here at Clark Hill because it involved a variety of issues — corporate, real estate, environmental, guardianship, trusts and construction issues, filed at three different venues at one point.”

Stacy Singer, executive of the Central Region Trust and Advisory practice for Northern Trust, has worked with many lawyers in her years of doing guardianship and estates work. Singer says Koenig is among the rare breed that factors in pragmatism to their approach.

“Ray is very outstanding at thinking about how to solve problems in a practical way,” she says. “That result might not always be your first choice, but it’s one everyone can live with and gets everyone to move on. I highly value that.”

An LGBT Focus

Koenig is formally assigned to mentor a senior attorney and associate at Clark Hill, but he informally mentors anyone who approaches him for help.

“I had a lot of people helping me when I came up in the profession, and I think that’s what you should do,” he says. “And of course there are also purely selfish reasons, since I get to meet more people.”

Given his high position as an out gay man working in Chicago law, Koenig is an especially valuable resource to members of the LGBT community who want to accomplish what he has in a city that is ever evolving but not yet fully progressive.

Koenig joined Clark Hill as an openly gay attorney, made equity within a year

and made managing partner in charge of the Chicago office one year after that. He is also one of seven elected executive committee members nationwide at his firm of more than 325 attorneys.

“Early on in my career, I was encouraged to get as involved with as many LGBT issues as possible,” he says. “The world that existed in 1999 when I passed the bar is very different than the one now, even in the liberal city of Chicago. Also, people are now more respectful just because of the career position I’m in.”

Koenig says his own experiences as a gay man in the Chicago legal field have been “uniformly positive” outside of a few small issues, including one in which a witness made a statement disparaging his sexuality and the judge halted the cross-examination just to admonish the witness.

However, he admits that his own experiences probably aren’t standard with lawyers in the LGBT community who are out.

“I still hear stories from colleagues and friends about them being treated differently or disparaged publicly,” he says.

Much of Koenig’s work outside of the firm tends to focus on social justice. He is vice chair of the Chicago House and Social

Service Agency and is a mayoral appointee to the city’s Commission on Human Relations, through which he adjudicates claims brought under the two human rights ordinances in Chicago.

Working to alleviate the struggles of others is important to Koenig in part because he grew up in a family headed by a single mother and with no financial safety net.

“We were the working poor, one injury away from being homeless,” he says.

Koenig is especially proud of serving as co-chair of the finance committee for the Illinois Unites for Marriage Coalition, through which he helped raise \$1.6 million and was instrumental in legalizing same-sex marriage in the state.

“For our community and civil rights, it was big to go from having no marriage rights in Illinois to having them,” he says. “Just think of the culture of respect that comes from being married.”

Koenig has been with partner Johnny Song for more than 10 years, marrying him in the beginning of 2010. He says Song has been invaluable in helping raise their young daughters, given Koenig’s hectic schedule.

“It can be challenging, but I have a couple things most people don’t have. First

off, I married incredibly well,” Koenig says. “My spouse does an amazing job of keeping our family going with my support and participation, but he takes the lions’ share.”

“I also work for a pretty awesome firm that allows me to work remotely as necessary so I can spend more time with my family.”

Koenig learned early on that in order to be successful in his chosen profession, he had to learn never to lie about his sexuality.

“You have to give up the divide between personal and professional,” he says. “So if you’re a gay attorney, you have to be out because so much of business development is cocktails and talking about families and spouses, and you have to eventually bring them out to events.”

MB Financial’s Sargent says he does a great job managing his personal and professional life.

“He’s so well respected in regard to his work in the LGBT community, and he has a wonderful family life,” she says. “The fact that he does it all while also being a managing partner for Clark Hill is a big indicator of his overall expertise and skill.” ■