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—LAW FIRM BUSINESS—

Jenner & Block's 'counterculture' approach finds traction in LA

Launched during the 2009 recession, the firm's satellite office has kept a tight focus

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LOS ANGELES — Rick Richmond knew it would be a rare career opportunity to launch the Los Angeles office of Chicago-based Jenner & Block LLP. What he didn't plan for was opening the outpost during the height of the latest economic recession.

But that's exactly what he did in April 2009, when he departed Kirkland & Ellis LLP alongside fellow partner Brent Caslin. It may have been "my mid-life crisis," Richmond now jokes, but at the time, he was both excited by the challenge and daunted by how to snag a third attorney.

To his benefit, the office reached three attorneys within hours of opening, Richmond said, and it's been only uphill from there. Through a summer associate program and a focus on L.A.-specific practices, Jenner & Block has seen steadfast growth during its five years in the city.

"We're ahead of where most firms are in Los Angeles after five years and ahead of where a lot of people thought we would be," said G. Thomas Stromberg, a corporate partner who joined Jenner's L.A. office from Kaye Scholer LLP last year.

Jenner & Block has taken what Richmond termed a "counterculture" approach to expansion. In its 100th year, the litigation-heavy firm only has four outposts. It finally turned to



Alexander Drecun / Special to the Daily Journal

Rick Richmond has guided Jenner & Block's LA office from two attorneys to 34 since 2009.

Los Angeles in 2009 to fill its gap on the West Coast, where it was losing some client work to California-based firms, Richmond said.

It entered the Los Angeles market with targeted practices in mind: commercial, entertainment and patent litigation, Richmond said. While the practices were a good fit for L.A., he said, they also aligned with Jenner's firmwide strengths.

"One reason firms struggle when they come to town is that they don't carefully look at and understand our legal market," he said. "When you come to this town, your primary focus has to be litigation."

To gain manpower, the office largely looked to its summer associate program. Richmond said it was a mistake for many firms to have cut or reduced their summer programs during the recession, but Jenner reaped the benefits. In 2010, with only five attorneys in L.A., Jenner brought on its first summer class.

Two of the three associates were law school valedictorians.

The office has since expanded to 34 attorneys, 13 of whom came in as summer associates.

"How did we grow?" Richmond said. "I'm hugely committed to the idea that for the longer term, the way you're really going to grow and succeed is to develop your own in-house talent."

On top of that, the outpost has seen key group acquisitions, including a six-partner team from Hogan Lovells US LLP led by litigator Richard Stone in 2011. The addition was a "major coup" for the office, Richmond said, because the attorneys added significant entertainment and commercial litigation capabilities.

The office's litigators also have been at the forefront of recent cutting-edge cases in the media and entertainment space. Stone, for example, represents several Fox Broadcasting Co. entities in a

copyright infringement case about over-the-air broadcasting involving startup Aereo Inc. The U.S. Supreme Court heard oral arguments between the broadcasting industry and Aereo on Tuesday.

Additionally, Jenner's L.A. attorneys are involved in a highly-publicized pro bono suit against Gov. Jerry Brown over his alleged misuse of funds for distressed homeowners.

"In general, the Jenner name has been on the upswing," Stone said Tuesday, while on his way back from Washington, D.C. "With Supreme Court victories and high-profile pro bono cases ... everyone seems to now know the firm name."

Legal consultant Peter Zeughauer said the firm has a strong litigation brand and a national practice, which likely helped it succeed in Los Angeles. Jenner's L.A. outpost got off to a "strong start" and has done better than some other firms that have attempted the same feat, he added.

The office's next frontier is building up its corporate transactions and corporate investigations practices, which will happen through the same strategic growth as its other practices, Richmond said.

There are five corporate attorneys in Los Angeles so far, Stromberg said, and he expects that number to increase this year. In a notoriously difficult corporate market, the L.A. outpost is focusing on corporate practitioners in the media and technology, middle-market and cross-border arenas.

"The corporate department will look different by the end of the year," Stromberg said. "Of course, we're somewhat impatient, but we won't sacrifice the quality or the collegiality of the office to do that."