

# Going Up

## *New Chair Sees McGuireWoods as a National Powerhouse*

by Jackie Kruszewski



### Jonathan P. Harmon could've been a contender.

But, once he realized Major League Baseball wasn't in the cards, the Long Islander settled for a distinguished career in the military and law.

On December 4, the board of partners at McGuireWoods, Virginia's largest law firm, elected Harmon their chair. He's the first African-American to hold the role, and he follows an 11-year run by Richard Cullen and his managing partner, Thomas E. Cabaniss, during which the firm grew exponentially. Harmon, 52, moved to Richmond in 1995 to start his career at McGuireWoods and has led their business and securities litigation department since 2015, representing many Fortune 500 companies. Raised on Long Island, he graduated from the US Military Academy at West Point, where he played center field for the baseball team, the Black Knights of the Hudson.

Harmon served in Operation Desert Storm as a first lieutenant in the Army's 1st Cavalry Division. He now lives in Manakin-Sabot with his wife, Rhonda, and four children.

*Virginia Lawyer* magazine had a few questions for McGuireWoods' new chief.

#### **Virginia Lawyer: Why did you become a lawyer?**

Harmon: I wish I had some real interesting story about that. I did not grow up wanting to be a lawyer. I, foolishly, grew up ... wanting to be a baseball player. Then when I realized I wasn't going to be center fielder for the Mets, I ended up going to West Point.

After that, I had a 5-year military commitment, and I was stationed at Fort Hood, Texas, and during that time went over to the first Gulf War. The military's a really special place — the camaraderie, the sense of duty — it's unlike any other entity you work for. But I was fairly newly married and wasn't really sure if being called to go off on a moment's notice was what would be best for our

family, so I decided to get out, thought and prayed about what I wanted to do.

And, actually, when I was in the first Gulf War, my wife, Rhonda, was starting law school — a very interesting time. When it came time for me to get out, she started clerking for a judge on the Fifth Circuit. So, I went to law school at the University of Texas.

**So she was a real trailblazer in the legal profession for your family.**

For the Harmon family, she was. I benefited from being able to ask her all the stupid questions you ask your first year of law school. What's a tort? How do you form a contract? And all those things. I had a little leg up because of her.

**Is your wife still practicing?**

After we started having kids, she stopped practicing. When she practiced, when we first moved here, we worked on this very significant case for Virginia, the Nationwide Home case with then-City Council Member Tim Kaine. It was a \$100 million case against Nationwide Insurance Company by Housing Opportunities Made Equal. The case ended up getting reversed, then settled. But at the time it was a very significant redlining case. Shortly after that case, she hung up her cleats to do something that's much harder than what I do.

**Is there a case of your career that stands out to you as one you're proud of, or maybe a best moment as a lawyer?**

One case that was very memorable — it was my first, complex commercial case, and I got brought in to try it. And it involved a small company and a man who was the best liar I'd ever seen in my life. He had swindled millions of dollars from the company we were representing. And he'd gotten acquitted

So we were bringing a suit in a small, east Texas town against two local folks, and we were then the biggest paper company in the world. And we won, we convinced them that he had stolen, and they gave us exactly what we had asked for.

Another case that was more recent, that I felt was important, was we represented a large financial institution that had been accused of targeting an Islamic charity. They had cut off their account because they had deemed there was some suspicious activity. And that was a case in Detroit we went and tried and won.

It's hard to just limit it to a few, but those are two that come to mind.

**Do you have any that come to mind as a worst moment, maybe early in your career, maybe something that you learned a lesson from?**

I got parachuted into a case up in Bangor, Maine, that involved that Seinfeld episode where George Costanza was faking an injury at work. And he had to take this slide glide chair up the stairs, and it was hilarious because he was going really slow, inch-by-inch. And I tried a case that someone else had worked up where the allegation was that this man, who was disabled and needed a glide chair, contended that he had been harassed and forced out because people were using the Seinfeld episode [against him]... It was called the Seinfeld case for a while.

In a lot of the cases, I do mock juries. In this one, we elected to go in on the cheap, and we tried the case and lost. Then on appeal, the court granted my motion and reversed it and we won.

But I learned a lot. One, sometimes doing things on the cheap is not the way to go in jury research. And, number two, I had underestimated.... Maybe about a decade earlier, this client that we were representing had had a really ugly problem up in that area, and I had completely, as a younger lawyer — this was maybe 15 years ago — underestimated or didn't read the effect that that had had on the people. The people were still upset about that up in Bangor.

I learned the importance of looking at the broader picture. Particularly, sometimes you jump in, and you're focused on how to win. But you could miss something of the things that were very important that influence people's thinking.

**I imagine that's part of what makes trying cases all over the country interesting — the local angle.**

That's one of the parts of my practice that I just love. I love Richmond and I love being here in Virginia. But I try many more cases outside of Virginia than I ever try in Virginia, multiples more. It's just worked out that way for me. And I love being in new places, figuring out the environment, figuring out what you're dealing with. I've tried cases from

*Harmon continued on page 24*

Harmon *continued from page 19*

converted gun shops down in South Carolina, to the 50th floor of a courthouse in Cleveland — the judge had a courtroom up there. And it's just fascinating because every place is different. You do have to adapt, because what works in Hampton, SC, doesn't necessarily resonate the same as in Detroit, MI, or in San Francisco, CA.

I love that component of it. And I also love the component of it of not being focused in one particular area. I try cases of all particular types, and I like it that way.

### **What are your goals as chair for McGuireWoods?**

Our firm is organized with the chair leading the firm, providing the voice, the face, and the strategic direction. My first act as the chair was to nominate the managing partner, J. Tracy Walker IV, who is an outstanding lawyer, an incredible person. He is responsible really for carrying out the vision of the chair and running the firm on a day-to-day basis. So what I've been doing and I will continue to do is to spend a lot of time at all of our 23 offices, visiting our partners and staff and lawyers, to just talk to them, because our people have some incredible insight and incredible ideas on our direction.

Richard Cullen and Tom Cabaniss, in my opinion, did a phenomenal job of leading our firm for the past 11 years. They took McGuireWoods from being a super regional firm and made us a national firm, and I think our next period of development is to go from being a national firm to being a national powerhouse. So that's what we have our sights on.

### **What are the biggest changes you've seen at the firm and in the legal profession?**

I think regarding McGuireWoods, just our growth. When I started, before Richard and Tom were chair and managing partner, we were really a Virginia firm. We were mid-Atlantic, but we didn't have any significant offices or presence outside of Virginia. And I had no clue that we were going — I think when I started, maybe we had seven offices — to go from seven to 23. You couldn't have convinced me that we were going to be in Brussels and London, all the places that we are.

But the thing about the firm, I've always felt like we were very collegial and that the

camaraderie here is very high. Despite the growth, I still feel that way.

In terms of the legal market, the increase in technology and its impact on the law, it's just grown so fast. I remember, when I first started, the big issue was some of the partners didn't trust research not from the book. If it was online, it was suspect. We were going through that transition.

Also, you didn't get back to clients immediately. They didn't have access to you all the time. We didn't have cell phones. There was always a little bit of a time lag, so to speak. Now, client service is happening so rapidly, being able to respond and the impact it's had on the practice. So I would say the proliferation of knowledge through technology has had a significant impact.

### **What do you like to do for fun?**

This is nothing earth shattering, but I love spending time with my wife and kids. In this type of practice you travel quite a bit and you're gone a lot, so I love spending time with them.

I'm also very passionate and been involved for close to 20 years in prison ministry for young men at the Bon Air Juvenile Correctional facility — men who are teenagers, effectively, who get involved in the juvenile system. And maybe over the last three or four years, I've been involved with [prison ministry for] older men, grown men in federal penitentiary down in Petersburg.

I also love traveling, love the beach, all types of water activities.

### **If you weren't a lawyer, what would you be?**

This is going to sound odd, but I think at this moment in time, I would be some type of counselor, maybe a marriage counselor, maybe helping youth who've gone through crisis, but I think I would be some type of counselor.

**Robert Lewis, McGuireWoods' senior manager for media relations, chimes in:** General Manager of the Mets?

**Virginia Lawyer:** This is a hypothetical, parallel universe, so you can be whatever you want to be.

Harmon: [laughing] Ok, so I'd be a counselor for all the Mets fans who are on the brink of suicide.

Lewis: You'll always have 1986.