



## Joe Gagliardo

### The Rock 'n' Roll Managing Partner

by Dustin J. Seibert

Thomas Bradley, a partner at **Laner Muchin, Ltd.**, says that whenever he goes out with his colleague Joseph M. Gagliardo, Gagliardo gets something of a rock star treatment.

“Everywhere we go, people come up and say ‘Hello’ to him. It never fails,” Bradley says. “He’s a real stand-up guy.”

The attention likely has a lot to do with all the connections Gagliardo has gained from a 36-year legal career in Chicago. But it might also have something to do with the fact that he’s a rock star.

By day, Gagliardo is the managing partner of Laner Muchin, an employment law firm. By night, he plays bass guitar for the Cool Rockin’ Daddies, a compendium of old friends who play original music and covers. The band has opened for established bands like ZZ Top, Ted Nugent, Heart and Cheap Trick.

“It’s fun because I’ve always liked music, and also fun because it’s something far from being a lawyer,” Gagliardo says.

He’s had decades to build his audience on the courtroom and on the stage. Gagliardo,

61, is a Chicagoan through and through. He grew up a few blocks from Wrigley Field in the 1950s, the youngest of four children. His parents, Joe and Marie, owned an Italian grocery store that specialized in making Italian sausage.

It was his parents’ middle-class background and dedication to hard work that motivated him to stay on top of his academics.

“They wanted me to have more opportunities than they had,” he says. “They used to hammer into me to get an education because it’s the foundation of your future. They’d tell me you can lose your material possessions, but no one can take your education from you.”

When he was in St. Benedict Preparatory High School, Gagliardo read *Gideon’s Trumpet*, the Anthony Lewis book that depicts the landmark *Gideon v. Wainwright* U.S. Supreme Court case in which the court ruled under the 14th Amendment that courts are required to provide counsel to those who can’t afford their own attorneys in criminal cases.

“It really impacted me how a lawyer could affect society in a positive way and on such a

large-scale basis,” he says.

The ethos of acceptance was also shared through his parents, who did so in an era when it was not as common.

“My parents’ mantra when I was growing up was to always treat everybody with dignity and respect, the way you want to be treated,” he says. “We never talked in the house about race or ethnicity or gender...that was just never a topic of conversation.”

#### Fateful Career Timing

Gagliardo studied business administration at DePaul University before immediately enrolling in The John Marshall Law School with no idea what type of law he wanted to practice.

“I had an open mind,” he says. “When I went to law school, I thought I’d be a general practitioner, like a neighborhood lawyer who does just about anything.”

His entree into employment law was a series of quick decisions. When he graduated from John Marshall, he didn’t apply for jobs because he “had no desire” to work in a law firm, opt-

ing instead to hang his own shingle.

Gagliardo had his own practice for about a year when a neighbor who viewed him as a mentor of sorts gave him something to think about.

“He told me, ‘I understand you don’t want to work in law firm, but it would be beneficial for you to get some government experience so you can come back out and run your own firm,’” he says.

Under the pretense that he would develop experience and contacts that would serve the rest of his career in private practice, Gagliardo applied to every legal government office he could, including the Office of the Corporation Counsel, which granted him an interview.

As he waited in the lobby for his interview, an old DePaul classmate who practiced law for the corporation counsel happened to come out.

“He told me that if they made me an offer, I should take it because they’ll give me as much responsibility as I’ll want and as much experience as I can absorb,” Gagliardo says.

When he received an offer from the corporation counsel in fall 1978, he had the option of two openings: prosecuting liquor license violations or handling personnel employment cases.

Another counsel attorney took Gagliardo out for a drink and convinced him that employment law was the “wave of the future,” so he decided to put his business degree to work on the legal side of things.

“It was those little decisions I didn’t think long and hard about that just fell into place that started and drove my entire career,” he says.

## Washington’s Historic Legacy

Gagliardo worked for the office for a decade under four mayors: Michael Blandic, Jane Byrne, Harold Washington and Eugene Sawyer. The experience provided Gagliardo with a lesson in law, life and politics, he says.

But it was Washington—Chicago’s first black mayor—who had the most profound influence on Gagliardo’s attention to under-represented individuals inside and outside of the field.

Gagliardo eventually took on the role of promoting diversity at Laner Muchin, for which the firm won the Thomas L. Sager Award from the Minority Corporate Counsel Association in 2007. He also worked on the board of Windows of Opportunity, a nonprofit that assists Chicago Housing Authority youth and senior citizens with enrichment programs.

“‘Diversity’ wasn’t a buzzword back then like it is now, but looking back, it’s clear that Mayor Washington lived and breathed diversity,” he says. “Not only having diverse people around him but diverse opinions. He always wanted to hear every aspect of an issue in order to be able to make the best decisions.”

Gagliardo says he was embraced by Washington’s regime when he was promoted to deputy corporation counsel and then to first deputy while in his early 30s.

“The battle that we always face is the stereotype of the mob,” he says. “There’s unfortunately a lot of negativity that goes with that. It’s a stereotype that’s not helpful for any Italian Americans. However, Mayor Washington was not affected by stereotypes.”

Hon. James Montgomery, who met Gagliardo when he was appointed corporation counsel under Washington in 1983, continued to consult him on legal matters decades after

they worked with each other.

“Joe has always been a very in-depth lawyer who thoroughly deals with the issues he’s involved in...I noticed that from the very beginning,” Montgomery says. “I’ve watched him professionally over the years, and he’s just an outstanding lawyer in his field.”

## Private Firm Transition

Around the time Washington passed away in 1987, Laner Muchin’s senior partner Dick Laner approached Gagliardo a second time about coming to his firm.

“I didn’t feel it was the right time,” Gagliardo says. “It was still relatively early in the Washington administration, and we had an exciting progressive and aggressive agenda. My gut told me it wasn’t the right time to leave.”

Three years later, Gagliardo decided to make the move.

“Though everything was great, and I was really at a high point, I thought that it was the right time to go—when I’m on top,” he says. “Our firm was the outside labor counsel to the city under Washington and Sawyer, so I worked with the lawyers, knew the quality of their work and their commitment to quickly and thoroughly respond to client needs, and I felt very comfortable making the move.”

Gagliardo came to Laner Muchin as a partner in 1988, a somewhat daunting transition considering where he came from.

“The first days I was here, the silence was deafening,” he says. “I went from literally every day at the city never knowing what was going to happen no matter what I had planned. Then when I joined the firm, I had no one waiting in line to see me. I didn’t have to run in the mayor’s office for some important issue.”

“It was uncertainty, but I felt I’d made the right decision and figured it was just a matter of time before I was settled and things started to roll again, and that’s how it worked out.”

Gagliardo became a managing partner in 2005, which involves him in a number of firm-related matters but hasn’t kept him out of the courtroom. He recently represented the State of Illinois in litigation involving the closure of multiple prisons. He also represented Metra in a high-profile 2013 case involving ousted CEO Alex Clifford.

He serves as an arbitrator for the American Arbitration Association, and was recently retained by the chief judge of the Circuit Court of Cook County to investigate alleged misconduct in the probation department.

“I still get into court, just not on a daily basis like I used to,” he says. “Those kinds of projects end up absorbing you for whatever period of time they go on.”

## Laner Muchin’s Future

Founded in 1945, Laner Muchin is a single-office firm with 45 attorneys. Gagliardo says the firm weathered the harsh economic climate well.

“It wasn’t always easy, but we didn’t have to let any lawyers go, and we were able to roll with the punches with everyone we had,” he says.

He wants the firm to continue with a client-driven culture in which all client calls and emails are returned within two hours of reception.

“We don’t envision having other offices at this point. We’ve found that representing

clients in just about every state works fine without opening other offices,” he says. “The strength of our firm is to work with good clients and continue to hire talented lawyers who are good people.”

As always, Gagliardo seeks to ensure that diversity remains an important part of the firm’s culture, but not necessarily limited to race and gender.

“I came from a working class background and had experiences different than others who didn’t have the same environment,” he says.

Retired U.S. District Judge Wayne Andersen met Gagliardo when he represented the City of Chicago in the Shakman case pending before him.

“Joe is both an attorney and counselor, and he defines the meaning of the word counselor,” Andersen says. “He brings out the best in his clients as well as in their adversaries.”

## Working with Government

Though Gagliardo has worked for a private firm, he has a special affinity for working with government clients, including the State of Illinois, Cook County and the City of Chicago.

“You get involved in cases and issues that affect society and have the ability to go beyond just the particular court case,” he says. “The outcome, positive or negative, has much broader ramifications.”

Though he is quite comfortable in a courtroom like most successful litigators, Gagliardo recognizes the importance of knowing when to pull in the reins.

“While I function as a lawyer, I try to think of what a client’s ultimate objective is and how I can get there efficiently,” he says. “Many times, it’s easy for lawyers to get embroiled in litigation mode. Oftentimes, simply by asking a few questions, you find out the client’s goals and find the best way to get there, inside of court or out.”

Bradley, who has worked with Gagliardo for more than two decades, says the key to his success is his versatility.

“There are a lot of different lawyers who are good at doing specific things,” he says. “Joe is good at doing all of those things. He’s adept at every aspect of the law, and that’s why he’s been so successful.”

Gagliardo has been especially active in a number of nonprofit organizations outside of Laner Muchin. The Caring Arts Foundation brings artists and musicians to area cancer patients. And the Leadership Council on Legal Diversity, an organization in which he was a founding member, pairs mentors in the legal community with underprivileged students to help them get into and through law school and into the legal profession.

“I like organizations where there’s a direct correlation between what you’re doing and its impact,” he says. “I don’t just work on something and hear about the results. I see how it impacts people in a positive way.”

All his work traces back to his upbringing as that kid who came from a blue-collar working family to become a managing partner of one of the preeminent employment law firms in Chicago.

“That makes me very grateful and appreciative and makes me realize that I need to help people along with whatever path they’re going on,” he says. ■