

New practice, volunteering suit former Alcon counsel

BY BETTY DILLARD

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Kathleen Knight had always said she would retire when she turned 55.

True to her word she did. In 2004, she retired after 23 years as vice president deputy general counsel for Fort Worth-based Alcon Inc., an eye care company.

She filled her newfound hours with purpose, spending time with family — she and husband Tim Knight, a Fort Worth dentist, have five children — traveling abroad and volunteering with various organizations. But, just as many friends and family members predicted, she says, her retirement was short-lived.

“I got bored. I thought I could golf my life away but I couldn’t because the truth is, I’m not that good of a golfer,” she laughs.

Knight decided to “unretire.”

A native of Wilkes-Barre, Pa., Knight is a law school graduate of the University of Oklahoma and a graduate of the Advanced Management Program at Harvard Business School. Before settling at Alcon in 1982, she worked with Exxon USA, where she provided legal advice on commercial real estate transactions, antitrust, and marketing and sales matters. A brief stint at Tesoro Petroleum Co. in San Antonio started her career in litigation.

“I decided it was time to try something new,” she says. “I was committed to going with a Fort Worth firm. Although I had worked at Alcon for 23 years, I had never really spent that much time in Fort Worth. I decided I wanted to be here and get to know the city.”

A chance meeting with attorney Mack Ed Swindle — her go-to guy when she was at Alcon — resulted in Knight’s second career with Whitaker, Chalk, Swindle & Sawyer LLP. She started with the Fort Worth firm last October, specializing in litigation, mediation, strategic alliances and intellectual property, with a special interest in funding biotechnology and nanotechnology developments.

“Mack Ed told me I was too young to retire,” Knight says. “He was right. My practice is on the rise and I’m really enjoying it. I wake up happy every morning.

“I love the law. I love practicing it. I’m a natural at litigation. I am a fierce advocate but never let my zeal overcome sound business strategy.”

Before Knight agreed to become a partner at Whitaker Chalk, she made certain the firm would allow her time off to volunteer in the community.

“When I decided to ‘unretire,’” she says, “I was committed to spending at least 25 percent of my time giving back to Fort Worth, the city that had given me the opportunity and support to achieve my first suc-

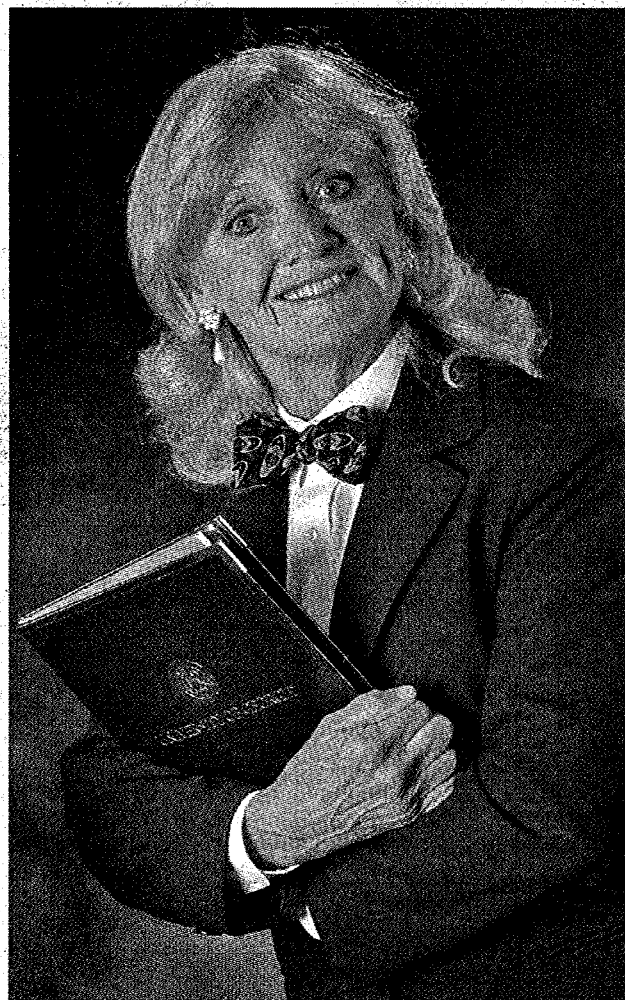


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cess. The Whitaker Chalk firm is very supportive of that goal.”

Knight says she averages 10 to 15 hours per week volunteering with professional groups including the American Bar Association and the Tarrant County Bar Association.

Netty Matthews, vice president of membership services for the Fort Worth Chamber of Commerce, introduced Knight to Darlene Ryan, executive director

of TECH Fort Worth. The nonprofit business incubator works with technology start-up companies to launch them into the Fort Worth economy.

Its mission is right up Knight’s alley. Ryan did not have to twist Knight’s arm to voluntarily share her legal knowledge learned in the ophthalmic industry with some of TECH Fort Worth’s biotechnology start-ups.

“She’s a valuable asset to TECH Fort Worth. Life science companies should be happy to have her as a resource,” said Debra Wawro, CEO and co-founder of Resonant Sensors Inc., a producer of optical sensors for biochemical and pharmaceutical applications.

“One of the valuable things about her is that she has an extensive legal background in the pharmaceutical industry. Her expertise and wide variety of experience at Alcon is invaluable for a company like ours,” Wawro said. “She’s been quite helpful and generous with her time and experience.”

Knight says she has seen numerous ideas and patents never develop from concept to commercialization, especially in the life science area, because of legal issues. Her goal is to help inventors and small business owners strategize and plan ahead while teaching them how to get a patent approved and how to protect their intellectual property.

“My forte has always been turning legal obstacles into opportunities by strategic planning and aggressive defense,” Knight says. “Volunteering my skills, working with these companies who otherwise would not seek out legal advice, to identify legal issues and set strategies for handling them is energizing and fulfilling.”

Knight’s other volunteer mission is serving as a mentor to women re-entering the work force or facing challenges in their current positions. She recently began coaching business women she has met through the Chamber’s Women Influencing Business forum.

“Having come up in what was early in my career considered a man’s world provided me with many challenges. The skills and attitude I developed to meet those challenges served me well,” she explains.

“I did not have experienced women in my field to turn to for advice so now that I am that experienced woman I am committed to helping others. I enjoy serving as a sounding board for their ideas and issue and sharing my experiences with them.”

Knight says she has no plans to re-retire any time soon.

“I love being a part of strengthening Fort Worth’s small business community,” she says. “It is my way of saying, ‘Thank you, Fort Worth.’”

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