Jack of all trades

O’Malley brings wealth of experience as visiting professor at NIU College of Law

BY JENN BALLARD
Law Bulletin staff writer

Jack M. O’Malley has worked as a Chicago cop, the highest-ranking Cook County prosecutor, a partner at a prominent law firm, general counsel to a household name and a state appellate court justice.

“I tend to do things for a few years and then move onto something else because I’m always looking for new challenges,” he said.

His latest venture brought him to Northern Illinois University College of Law, where he’s a visiting professor.

“I hope my experience helps me be able to tell them what the real world is like out there,” he said.

The son of a firefighter and stay-at-home mother, O’Malley, 61, grew up in the middle of a six-child household in Elmhurst.

When he was 21, O’Malley moved to the city and joined the Chicago Police Department as an officer and tactical investigator.

“It was a great job for a young man to have,” he said. “But I was getting old. When I was about 24, 25 years old, I thought I should start thinking about school. So, that’s what I did.”

While working for the police department, O’Malley earned his bachelor’s degree from Loyola University in 1978.

He left the police department for a year to attend Cornell University Law School, but he returned to Chicago and his job, completing a law degree in 1981 at University of Chicago Law School.

He worked at the City of Chicago Law Department for two years, handling civil rights suits with an emphasis in employment discrimination.

From 1983 to 1990, O’Malley worked as an associate and later a partner at Winston & Strawn LLP, representing corporate clients in complex commercial litigation.

His background in law enforcement eventually led him to public office. From 1990 to 1996, O’Malley served as the state’s attorney of Cook County.

“It was a really exciting opportunity to do really important work,” he said. “I tried to organize the office into an efficient prosecution bureau. There were a lot of dedicated people in the office, and it was a privilege to lead them.”

Andrea L. Zopp, president and chief executive officer of the Chicago Urban League, was hired by O’Malley as an associate state’s attorney. She said O’Malley displayed a fearless attitude that helped him succeed at the job.

“He’s really driven, so when he gets on a case, he gets things done,” she said. “He was always creating opportunities for women and people of color that were initially difficult to implement.”

O’Malley returned to Winston & Strawn for a year, and then was recruited by General Electric. He worked as the vice president and general counsel at Marquette Medical Systems, a subsidiary of GE.

“They had some major antitrust issues, and they were looking for someone to come in and head up the litigation matters for one of their major businesses,” O’Malley said. “It was a whole new experience to work for a client, as opposed to representing them.”

He later became the senior global litigation counsel for GE’s Medical Systems, which is responsible for medical supply businesses.

“I did a lot of international traveling in different parts of the world and supervised in-house and outside counsel,” he said. “But I eventually grew weary of all the travel, so then I decided to switch.”

In 2000, O’Malley was elected as a 2nd District Appellate Court justice, serving on that Illinois court for a decade and authoring more than 1,000 opinions.

When he moved to the bench, he said, it was something new and different from practicing law.

“Appellate work is really rewarding, because it is all packaged together and given to you to make a decision on,” he said.

“The key to that job was having really great law clerks, and I really worked hard at hiring the right and talented law clerks. It made all the difference in the world when researching for opinions.”

U.S. District Judge Frederick J. Kapala, who worked with O’Malley on the appellate court, said when someone offers an opinion that differs from O’Malley’s, that person better be prepared.

“You had to be at the top of your game just to keep up,” Kapala said.

“And I’m sure his students have come to the same realization. Not to say that he wouldn’t ever change his mind... But in order to get him to do it, you needed a well-reasoned, compelling argument to persuade him to do so.”

After leaving the bench, O’Malley taught a class on criminal law for a year at his alma mater, the University of Chicago, before taking his current job at NIU in 2011.

“My wife and I moved out to the country, so we’re further out west,” he said. “And DeKalb asked me to come out there as a visiting professor, and that was more conducive with our country lifestyle.”

NIU College of Law’s views on reforming legal education through a praxis approach also attracted O’Malley to the job.

“Northern is such a great opportunity for kids who want to be lawyers at a great value — both educationwise and costwise,” he said. “It’s not as well known as it should be.”

He’s taught classes on civil procedure, white-collar crime and legal skills.

“They’ve asked me to come back in the fall and teach criminal procedure,” he said. “I think wherever they have a need, as a visiting professor should. The faculty has been really supportive with helping me with any adjustments.”

Jennifer L. Rosato, NIU’s law school dean, recruited O’Malley to join the faculty.

“When I met him, I knew that he would not only bring a lot of experience, but he would make a terrific teacher,” she said. “He was so dedicated to teaching students and mentoring them. It was an easy choice to bring him on.”

jbballard@lbpc.com

Northern is such a great opportunity for kids who want to be lawyers at a great value — both educationwise and costwise. It’s not as well known as it should be.”