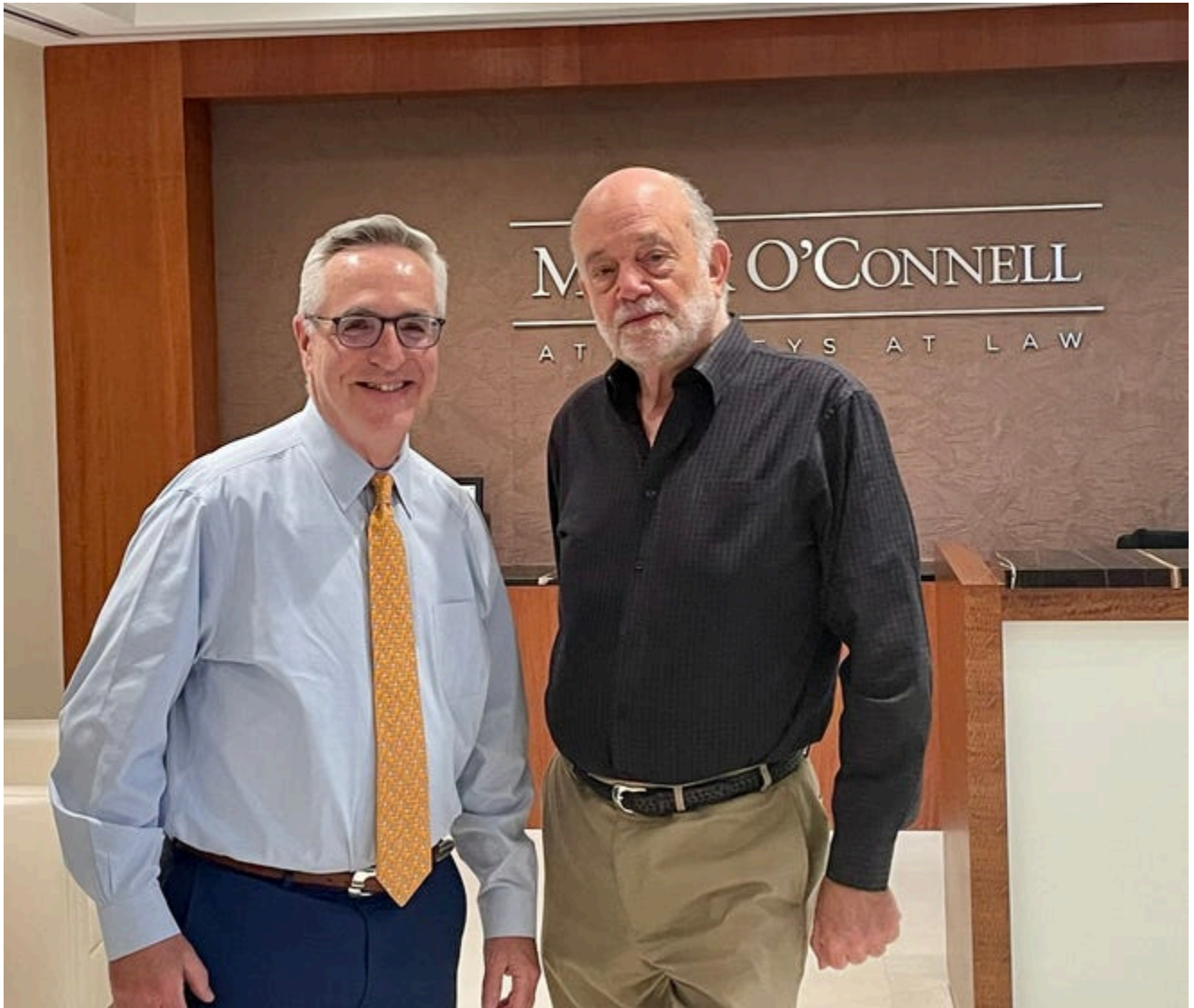


Law firm Mirick O'Connell evolves with Worcester since 1916

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Worcester is celebrating its tercentennial in 2022. The Telegram & Gazette is profiling some of the oldest companies in the city over the years.

WORCESTER — The law firm Mirick O'Connell was founded 106 years ago in 1916. The city just celebrated its 300th birthday. Which means, over the last century, the firm has seen over a third of Worcester's history.

"The firm changed as Worcester changed," said James C. Donnelly Jr., counsel at Mirick O'Connell Attorneys at Law.

From humble beginnings as a family practice with a team of four lawyers, today Mirick O'Connell specializes in businesses and intellectual property laws, having grown to 64 attorneys and a total of 128 employees. The firm's scope has continued to expand with each new hire bringing in new specialties.

Today, much of the practice is geared toward the biotech and health care industries, now the drivers of Worcester's economy.

For all intents and purposes, Donnelly is a lifelong Worcesterite, having moved to the city when he was 5. When he left in 1964 after graduating high school, he remembered that where the Mercantile Center now stands were old buildings classified as "blighted" and slated for demolition.



During the time he was away, “the Mercantile complex (at 100 Front St.) was built and Mirick O’Connell had just finished renovating and taking over the entire 17th floor of the building.”

When the Front Street tower opened, the firm was one of the very first tenants — a far cry from the firm’s initial headquarters in the Commerce Building at 340 Main St.

More: Mirick O’Connell signs 10-year lease renewal with Mercantile Center

When Donnelly joined Mirick O’Connell, Attorneys at Law, in 1984, it was at the urging of John O. Mirick, Donnelly’s childhood friend and grandson of founder George Mirick. Donnelly came back just in time to witness Worcester emerging from the post manufacturing slump.

Donnelly said it was the establishment of the University of Massachusetts Medical School that really propelled the recovery of Worcester,

“not only a medical school but a Center of Life Science research which the city very carefully nourished and encouraged, so that we now have a very substantial biomedical industry that complements a wonderful health care system at UMass Memorial.”

The firm’s professional focus has rapidly shifted with the city’s economic priorities. One of the partners now specializes in helping businesses respond to government investigations and compliance, while others focus on topics such as employee benefits and pensions.

“In the health care industry there are a lot of different types of investigations that involve litigation skills even if not necessarily a court proceeding,” said Donnelly, who added that many of the current fields didn’t exist in 1984, let alone the firm’s founding in 1916.

The firm’s relationship with the city goes beyond business and into cultural life as well.

“The culture of the Mirick O’Connell firm and policy really encouraged staff to get involved in the community and I’m delighted that they really do,” Donnelly said. “Everybody sort of chooses their own path and gets committed to the things they want.”

Donnelly said he chose to be involved in cultural nonprofits, as he is a trustee of the Worcester Art Museum, the trustee/treasurer of the American Antiquarian Society, and the former president of the Higgins Armory Museum, where he presided over the Higgins Collection being transferred to WAM.

Newcomers welcomed

When attorney Chris Collins joined Mirick O’Connell, “if you wanted to be really successful in the company, you better get involved in the community,” he said. “There was that kind of leadership expectation.”

While Collins grew up south of Boston in Walpole, he happily shared that “Worcester is in my blood 100% now — it's a great place with so many well-intentioned people.”



Collins explained that it’s kind of hard to break into some places in Massachusetts but here, “newcomers are embraced to get involved in the city and become part of its civic and cultural scene.”

Collins has worked in Worcester for his entire professional career, starting in 1984 for the former Paul Revere Life Insurance Co. and moving to Mirick O’Connell in 2015.

Donnelly said he felt that it was exactly that kind of expectation that got many of his colleagues to be invested in Worcester’s future. They were “deeply engaged in organizations like the Chamber of Commerce, development of biomedical research space that is adjacent to UMass Medical School, the real estate deals to secure the land on which the research facilities are built, and

over the years, many have helped companies get started, some of which have become the firm's clients as well as doing legal work with UMass Memorial and Medical School."

Donnelly emphasized that Worcester has benefited from a very high standard of corporate citizenship, such as the creation of the Hanover Theatre and Conservatory for the Performing Arts and most recently, Polar Park.

"I think Worcester is a model of corporate citizenship and has roots deep in history," he said.

Instead of taking the money and spending it somewhere else, Donnelley added, Worcester companies created foundations that support many nonprofit organizations.

While the companies may no longer be here, the legacies remain, "even after we (Mirick O'Connell) are gone, we want to leave behind foundations like Stoddard, Alden, and Fuller, that will make Worcester a better place to live — a philosophy of leaving it better than you found it."

Added Collins: "I still think that's true — business leaders lend their time to the civic aspect of the city even though it is harder as the world becomes electronic."

When Collins moved here, he said it was easier for new people to get involved in the community, "it was small enough for even new leaders to rise in a pretty short period of time and that's much harder in other communities."

Federal court large step forward

Incidentally, Donnelly added, from a legal professional point of view, the decision to install a federal court in Worcester was very important to the legal profession.

“There are a number of cases that can only be handled in federal court — before that, lawyers had to travel to Boston and judges from Boston would take turns coming out to manage the cases before a full-time judge was authorized.”

He indicated that the public often overlooks the very important role that courts play in helping businesses resolve sophisticated problems — unfair advertising cases will typically be federal court cases so Worcester area companies having access to a federal court when needed is very important.

Furthermore, it helps the local economy in two ways: It attracts businesses as well as enforces the rules of fair competition.

That confidence was lost in the middle of the 20th century, when the city lost its industrial might, but it’s coming back, Collins said. Worcester has regained momentum from before pandemic, “especially if you look at the real estate environment — many people with young families trying to buy their first home and it is impressive for what you get per dollar spent — you pay more in Boston just for the benefit of being able to stroll the streets of Boston.”

Collins said he is not surprised that Donnelly returned to make his home in Worcester once more.

“It’s just that kind of place that draws you back in. How many American cities actually have a 300th anniversary to celebrate?” Collins said. “It shows that we have this incredible history to learn and grow from.”