

Jim Montana

Renaissance Man

by Amy Hoffman

When he was an undergraduate student at Georgetown, James S. Montana Jr. thought about becoming an English professor. But he looked at other English professors and didn't think he would fit in.

"So I decided to go to law school," says Montana, a partner at **Vedder Price**, "and I never regretted it."

Montana's father, James Sr., was also a lawyer. "When he was alive, it caused a lot of confusion," says Montana. "We often got each other's mail."

"He had a neighborhood office and one downtown. He mostly represented individual clients. He did a good job for them. That influenced me the most about becoming a lawyer."

One of the things that makes him most proud is when he walks down the street and runs into lawyers who knew his dad, and they say, "Boy, your dad was great. He helped me with this or with that."

Sweet Home Chicago

After law school, Montana went to work at the Wall Street firm of Simpson Thacher & Bartlett. He joined the firm's litigation department where he worked with Roy Reardon, who was then and is now a partner.

"It was clear he wanted to work hard and be successful," Reardon says. "He was young, attractive and articulate."

"He was good, and he was going to be really good. He was progressing quickly. He was smart and hard-working," says Reardon, "but he was a Chicago boy and wanted to be back in Chicago."

"I loved Simpson Thacher—it was a great firm, and they do fine litigation work—but New York is a hard place to raise a family," Montana says. After three years, Montana decided to return to Chicago and join the U.S. Attorney's Office.

"I thought if I am going to go back to Chicago, [the US Attorney's Office] is probably the best way to go back," says Montana. "You get to know the bar, get to know the judges, and then make a decision on what to do."

As an assistant U.S. attorney, Montana worked under former Gov. James R. Thompson who was then the U.S. attorney for the Northern District of Illinois. "I not only served under him at the U.S. Attorney's Office, but when he became governor, he appointed me to do certain things as outside counsel to the Governor's Office," Montana says.

"I regard him as one of the top assistant



U.S. attorneys who came out of that office at that time,” Gov. Thompson says. “I rank him as one of the best.”

Thompson respected Montana so much that he called on him to assist when the 1982 gubernatorial election was contested. He also called on him for important assignments while he was governor.

“I admired Jim (Montana) for a long time, and he worked for me in three different roles,” says Thompson.

In 1983, Thompson appointed Montana to the Illinois Court of Claims. “It was a



Montana discusses the Illinois Commerce Commission with Gov. Thompson.



Montana advises Gov. Edgar as his chief legal counsel in 1994.

part-time position, so I was still able to practice as well as be chief judge at the Court of Claims,” Montana says.

At the Court of Claims, Montana first met Illinois Supreme Court Justice Anne Burke.

“I met Jim when he was chief judge of the Court of Claims and I was a new member of the court,” Justice Burke says. “He was a mentor and close friend. He sat with me and explained procedures and processes. He is an exemplary professional.”

Working at the Governor’s Office

After leaving the U.S. Attorney’s Office, Montana spent eight years in private practice focusing on white collar criminal defense, parallel administrative proceedings, and litigation. Then in 1993, he became chief legal counsel to Gov. James Edgar.

Montana is very proud that he served two Illinois governors. “Governor Edgar was great to work with,” Montana says. “It wasn’t hard to be his general counsel. He listened to me. He paid attention to the things I said.”

“It was a great job because I like law, politics and government, and it was a perfect mix of the three,” says Montana. “Every decision I had to make had political, governmental and legal ramifications. I learned a lot about Springfield, state government and politics.”

“He is a very classy person, a very classy attorney,” Gov. Edgar says of Montana. “He was chief legal counsel longer than anyone else while I was in office.”

“We became good friends as well as colleagues. He was a very successful attorney before he came to Springfield, yet he realized he had to learn government,” says Edgar. “Because of this awareness, he fit in well in Springfield. It made him effective there.”

One of the biggest battles they faced together had to do with child protection/child support laws and how they dealt with abused and neglected children. This was due to the Baby Richard case.

“It was a difficult time,” Edgar says. “Jim (Montana) was helpful in working through the legal issues surrounding the case.”

With respect to the Baby Richard case, Montana says, “Governor Edgar really followed the law on that. It was one of the things he put me in charge of. I reviewed the briefs submitted by the agency involved and wrote briefs late into the night. I found it interesting. For me, it was not that hard because of my litigation background.”

“Two of the best jobs I have had, the most interesting, were the jobs where I made the least amount of money,” says Montana, “the U.S. Attorney’s Office and as chief legal counsel to Governor Edgar. They were great jobs. Every day was something new and exciting.”

“At the governor’s office—when the Leg-

islature was in session—I would be working from 7 o’clock in the morning until God knows what time of the night because you never knew when you had to go to a meeting about a bill that was being considered that the governor was interested in.”

“I’d collapse every night and then was up early the next morning, especially at the end of the session—that is when all the big stuff happens, the budget and other things. They wait until the very end. Don’t ask me why. They shouldn’t, but that’s just the way they do things down there.”

The Road Less Traveled

When Montana left the Governor’s Office, he became senior vice president and general counsel at Bally’s Entertainment Corporation, which then was headquartered in Chicago even though they had no Illinois casinos.

“I handled all their work with outside counsel,” Montana says. “I was in charge of making sure they were in regulatory compliance in those states [where they had casinos].”

“Montana was proactive and productive as general counsel,” says Lee Hillman, former chief financial officer at Bally’s. “He was a great guy to work with, very collaborative. He had a great network of people.”

Montana was also on the Bally’s compliance committee, which made sure the gaming company followed all of the regulations in all of the states where it operated. The committee also reviewed the backgrounds of people being hired in major positions to uncover any issues from the past.

“The compliance committee occupied a lot of my time and was an interesting experience,” Montana says.

Bally’s was eventually purchased by Hilton, which did not need a headquarters in Chicago, so the office was closed. “I was asked to stay on with the company, but I would have had to relocate to Atlantic City or Vegas,” says Montana. He declined.

“I was fortunate to have an employment contract with stock options that vested on change of control, so it wasn’t bad for 18 months. I’d like to do that every 18 months for the rest of my life.”

After spending five years as a partner at DLA Piper, Montana joined Vedder Price 12 years ago. He served as the head of the litigation department for three years. “My practice, as it was when I was first in private practice, still is white collar criminal defense, administrative proceedings that parallel the criminal matters, and straight litigation.”

Montana also handles some gaming law because of his experience as general counsel at Bally’s. He previously represented Caesar’s in connection with their effort to secure

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the 10th casino license in Rosemont. “It was an extensive representation, but Caesar’s decided not to go forward with their bid, and in light of what happened, it was an excellent decision on their part,” says Montana.

Montana currently has a number of criminal investigations, all involving the Department of Justice. They include an antitrust case involving foreign nationals, a health care fraud case, and two criminal tax investigations. “It keeps me busy,” Montana says.

“Because of Jim’s background and experience in the white collar criminal area and related administrative proceedings, he has made a great contribution to our firm,” says Douglas Hambelton, managing partner at Vedder Price.

“Shortly after he joined Vedder Price, he was elected as the litigation practice area leader (from 1997 to 2002) and served very ably in that role. We are glad to have him as our partner, and we appreciate his many contributions.”

“I have really been involved in a lot of different and varied things in my legal career,” says Montana, “and because of my experience, I get called on a lot at Vedder to help with various things.”

For example, because of his former general counsel role to the governor, if someone has an issue with the state of Illinois, Montana gets called in by his fellow partners to assist with whatever issues they are having.

He recently did some work with a partner in the Washington, D.C., office with respect to a very significant state contract that was awarded to a client. Montana was called in to provide assistance for a Springfield proceeding. They received a favorable outcome for the client.

“I have had the pleasure of having had Jim assist me in representing my client in a significant DOJ matter which lasted over a year,” says Randall Lending, a fellow Vedder Price partner. “Jim was incredibly responsive and worked closely with the assistant U.S. attorney to work out a favorable plea agreement. The client was very pleased with the service.”

“Jim is very well respected in the Chicago legal community by both judges and his peers,” Lending adds. “I am honored to have him as my partner.”

“Jim is a lawyer’s lawyer,” says Tony Valukas, who went to law school with Montana and worked with him at the U.S. Attorney’s Office. “Lawyers in trouble will turn to him because they trust him and know he is the best.”

“He is superb before a jury—I know because I have witnessed it. He is still a strong trial lawyer, and there aren’t a lot of them left. He is successful because his skill set is so strong.”

Montana says his friends give him a hard

time about the various positions he has held through his career. “You don’t see a lot of general practitioners anymore,” says Montana. “People tend to specialize in one thing. I’m a jack of all trades, a master of many but not all. It’s been a pretty good career.”

Manages to Make Time for More

As if being one of Chicago’s most successful, respected and well liked attorneys wasn’t enough, Montana somehow finds the time to get involved in, well, everything.

“One thing I really enjoyed that I gave up when I went to Springfield was teaching advanced trial practice at Loyola,” says Montana.

“He is a great lawyer and a wonderful teacher,” says Gino DiVito who taught with Montana for several years. “He is always right on point. He has done extraordinarily well both as a solo practitioner and as a partner at a large firm.”

Montana is an arbitrator with the American Arbitration Association assisting on commercial litigation matters. He works either as a single arbitrator or as part of a panel of three.

He is on the board of directors of the Chicago Special Olympics which meets monthly. “They are a great group,” says Montana. “They are so dedicated. It’s a wonderful thing to watch. I help out in any way I can.”

“It is fair to say Jim is a legend in the legal community as a litigator and a lawyer,” says Bob Graves, executive director of the Chicago Bar Foundation. “He is also well known for his efforts to make the justice system fair and accessible to everyone.”

Montana has served on the board of the foundation and been a volunteer. He has also been a longtime participant in the Investing in Justice Campaign and a member of the Lincoln Circle.

“He leads by example which is the best way to lead,” Graves says. “He walks the walk and talks the talk. He is a great guy, very genuine. People like working with him.”

Montana is member of Sen. Mark Kirk’s judicial selection committee, which makes recommendations to the senator for judicial vacancies for the U.S. District Court for the Northern District of Illinois in Chicago.

The committee does extensive background and reference checks and research on the candidates (numbering about 50), then interviews about 12 of them and recommends three to Kirk. The senator then forwards his recommendation to the White House. Montana has participated in three selection processes to date.

Most recently, Gov. Pat Quinn appointed him to be a public member of the Illinois Medical Disciplinary Board. The board meets twice each month to review complaints against Illinois physicians for viola-



Montana accepts the Award of Excellence from the Justinian Society of Lawyers.



Montana scuba diving with his son, Michael, in Cozumel, Mexico.

tions of the Medical Practice Act and can recommend probation, suspension, revocation or other sanctions. Montana’s four-year appointment to the unpaid position began in February 2014.

On a More Personal Note

Montana has five children. None of them are lawyers. “I don’t understand it,” he says. He has a son who is a doctor in Ely, Minn., two daughters who are working moms, a son who works for a private equity firm in California, and a son who just graduated from Tulane. He has eight grandchildren. Montana’s wife, Lori Montana, was director of the Illinois State Lottery for six years.

The two recently bought a place in Bonita Springs, Fla. “It’s like Chicago South,” says Montana. “I must have 20 lawyer friends down there.”

Though he didn’t visit much this winter, he did take up golf again. “When you have a place in Florida you have to play,” Montana says. “I haven’t golfed in a long time. I’m not a very good golfer.”

Could something have escaped his mastery? ■