

# Interview

## High-Stakes Litigation

An Interview with Michael V. Ciresi,  
Name Partner, Robins, Kaplan, Miller & Ciresi L.L.P.



Michael V. Ciresi

**EDITORS' NOTE** Michael Ciresi received his BA from the University of St. Thomas, his JD from the University of Minnesota Law School, and an Honorary Degree of Doctor of Laws from the Southwestern University School of Law. He joined the firm in 1971, and his trial practice focuses on product liability, intellectual property, and business and commercial litigation. Ciresi is a member of many organizations, including the Minnesota Bar Association, the American Bar Association, and the American Association for Justice, as well as civic associations, such as the Minnesota Early Learning Foundation and the Commission to End Homelessness.

**COMPANY BRIEF** Founded in 1938 as Robins & Davis, Robins, Kaplan, Miller & Ciresi L.L.P. ([www.rkmc.com](http://www.rkmc.com)) practices in areas such as product liability, mass tort, antitrust and trade regulation, insurance, intellectual property, health care, and finance. Named to The American Lawyer's 2007 "A-List," the firm employs more than 250 lawyers and 400 support staff in Atlanta, Boston, Los Angeles, Minneapolis, and Naples (Florida).

**What are the key practice areas for your firm, and what differentiates your firm from others in those marketplaces?**

Our forte is difficult and high-stakes litigation, on both the plaintiff and defense sides. We're taking risks with the clients, so we have a very unique niche in the marketplace. We take many representations on a contingent basis or a special

arrangement basis, through which we're sharing the risk with the clients. I think the unique nature of the firm is found in its willingness to take and share risk in the field of litigation with its clients, so that all segments of society have access to our courts. Our lawyers operate in a number of different substantive areas, so we bring a wide-ranging perspective. A lot of firms will take only one side or the other. We take a broader perspective. As a result, we're able to give our clients a much broader understanding of the nature of the problems they're facing.

**You have several locations within the United States. Do you see expansion in the future?**

We started our regional offices back in the '70s, which is probably earlier than most, and we did it because the clients we had wanted us to represent them in various geographic areas. Economically it made sense. With today's enhanced communications, it's a lot easier to have fewer offices and still be able to manage the larger cases throughout the country. I don't think we will be going into a lot of new geographic areas. I believe we'll have expansion within the current offices.

**Has the business changed over the years and affected the role you play?**

The legal profession as a whole has not been what one might call productive. Productivity has not been at the top of the wish list of lawyers, and it should be. We've done something that we call core team staffing, through which we have small teams that know all aspects of a given case. If a unique issue crops up, we can peel off individuals from the team, and they can bring in other lawyers to help with the issue. They can bring them in without those new lawyers having to learn the entire case. Then we can peel them off when we're done with that specific issue. We try to think down a few steps before just instinctively reacting to something, and we've found that works very well for us. We need to do this, because we have special arrangements in many cases, and we're on our own nickel. We've learned to spend a lot better than other firms. I think productivity is going to be a big issue in how legal services are delivered in the 21st century.

**Is the talent still coming into the profession? Is retention challenging?**

Retention has become a real challenge to the legal profession. I think there's more mobility in the legal profession today. I've been with

the firm for more than 35 years, and the people I started with generally have stayed with the firm for that entire time. Today, people come in and then rapidly move on, for a whole host of reasons. We try to focus on the people who we know are going to be the real producers over the years. We try to keep the ones that we're going to need long term, and we try to make the lifestyle more compatible. We're always looking at ways to improve ourselves, because our people are our greatest asset, and we make a tremendous investment to get them up to a certain point. It just makes sense to do what is necessary to keep them.

**You are very focused on the community and on giving back, and you do a tremendous amount of pro bono work. What role do you think this profession should play in the community?**

Giving back to the community and doing philanthropic and pro bono work are core values of the firm. We stress that when people come in, and we continue to stress it while they're here. We make sure that all of our partners understand our obligation to give to the common good. Over the past 10 years, we've given about \$20 million to programs for children in the states in which we operate. We focus our philanthropic activities primarily on education, social justice, and health care for children. We also have a private foundation in the firm that contributes to all kinds of organizations in the community. We are very proud of our pro bono activities.

**Did you know early on that this was the place you would be for the bulk of your career? Did you ever imagine this firm would grow the way it has?**

I knew it was the place I wanted to be for my career because of the type of work that it did and continues to do. We represent all segments of society. We believe in the common good. Did I envision that we would be this size or have the tremendous successes that we've had? No. I think we've grown beyond my expectations. We have accomplished many things, and that's because of our people. We've been very blessed with tremendous continuity with the core people in the firm, from the support staff, to the associates, to the partners. We have a poster that lists the names of all of our people who have been here for 15, 25, 35, and even 40 years. Clients see that and are just amazed at the continuity that we have. ●