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Lobbyist's rise to top 'speaks volumes'

By Bethany Krajelis
Law Bulletin staff writer

To his fellow lobbyists, John D. Nicolay is known as the speaker.

The Chicago lawyer was bestowed the title this year by past speakers of the Illinois Third House, a more than 50-year-old organization that represents the state's nearly 2,000 lobbyists.

And to those who have worked with Nicolay, his appointment was not that surprising. They say it's just one of many examples that illustrate not only how well-respected he is within his profession, but within state government as a whole.

"It really speaks volumes to what kind of guy John is," said former Senate Minority Leader Frank C. Watson, who gave Nicolay one of his first internships in the Illinois General Assembly. "I look at him as a true success story of someone who set their sights on what they wanted to do and actually did it."

The son of a stay-at-home mother and a fire chief turned county coroner, Nicolay, 41, grew up in the small southern Illinois village of Sandoval without much of a career plan. Though he briefly thought about being a doctor, his interests in politics quickly put him on a path leading to the state Capitol, which has become his second office as a partner with the Law Offices of Nicolay & Dart LLC.

During his undergraduate studies at MacMurray College in Jacksonville, Nicolay took an internship with Watson, his hometown senator. He may have just been running errands for lawmakers, but Nicolay said it was an experience that made him realize he wanted to somehow be involved in state government.

"It was the best way to learn the process," Nicolay said. "I got to watch everything happen from the bottom and met some really good people who set a good example."

Watson said Nicolay was not only a valuable asset to his staff, but was immediately accepted by everyone in Springfield, regardless of their position or party affiliation.

"He was outgoing, gregarious, very likable and just a really smart guy," Watson said. "He did quite well for himself and was obviously climbing up the ladder. I didn't need to shove him up the ladder, he ran up it."

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John D. Nicolay
Lawyer and lobbyist

Age: 41

Law school: DePaul University College of Law; 1995

Career highlights: Legislative aide to former Senate Minority Leader Frank Watson; special assistant to former Gov. James R. Thompson; assistant state's attorney and legislative liaison, Office of the Cook County State's Attorney; lawyer lobbyist, Shesky & Froelich Ltd.; general counsel, office of the Illinois Senate President; partner, Winston & Strawn LLP; and partner, Law Offices of Nicolay & Dart LLC.

Law firm: Law Offices of Nicolay & Dart LLC

Hobbies: Traveling (recently returned from a skiing trip in Colorado), cooking, enjoying wine, watching the St. Louis Cardinals, and being involved with the Illinois Third House — the organization for lobbyists that he leads.

Watson said he wasn't the only one who noticed Nicolay's potential. He said former Gov. James R. Thompson was impressed with Nicolay after hearing him speak at his college graduation. After that, it wasn't too long that Thompson, who could not be reached for comment, hired Nicolay as his special assistant.

And when Thompson left office, he brought Nicolay with him to Winston & Strawn LLP. In between holding coats and writing speeches, Nicolay said he began attending night classes at DePaul University College of Law.

During law school, Nicolay interned for the Cook County state's attorney's office, handling some traffic cases under Supreme Court Rule 711.

"I loved being in the courtroom," said Nicolay, who joined the prosecutor's office after graduating from law school in 1995. As an assistant state's attorney, he handled a variety of matters, including juvenile and felony cases, as well as serving as the office's legislative liaison.

Nicolay left the prosecutor's office after about two years to return to the Capitol to work as legal counsel to then-Senate President James "Pate" Philip. In that role, he was responsible for staffing the Senate Judiciary Committee.

After about two years, Nicolay left the staff to test the waters of lobbying. He took a job with Shesky & Froelich Ltd. in Chicago, where he worked in the government regulation group under Lawrence J. Suffredin Jr. He spent half his time litigating in court and the other half lobbying in Springfield.

"I loved the combination," Nicolay said. "I got to be in the courtroom and use my

skill set, which was well suited to the legislature."

Suffredin said as a lobbyist, he often appeared before the Senate Judiciary Committee that Nicolay staffed and was always impressed with his knowledge and judgment.

"He has great integrity, is straightforward and trustworthy," Suffredin said. "When I teach classes [on lobbying in state government], I always say you have to do have three things: educate, advocate and solve problems. John is always doing all three of them."

Like Watson, Suffredin said he's proud to have been able to be a part of Nicolay's career.

"I always felt good that I was able to give him one of his first jobs as a lawyer," Suffredin said. "He's a great guy, and every place he goes he makes a positive impression."

Nicolay left Shesky & Froelich to join back up with Thompson, his political mentor at Winston & Strawn LLP. He handled state governmental representation there for seven years before he and Timothy J. Dart left to form their own practice.

The two not only handle government-related legal matters, but lobby on a variety of issues, including technology, financial services, insurance and construction, among others.

One of their clients is Tenaska Inc., which is one of the nation's largest independent power producers. The Omaha, Neb.-based developer has proposed building a coal-fed energy plant in Taylorville that would use advanced technology to make it one of the cleanest

power plants in the world.

"It's really challenging learning a brand-new issue every day, but that's also what I love about my job," Nicolay said.

Margaret Houlihan, managing director of government affairs for United Airlines, said her company hired Nicolay on contract for a special project a few years ago.

She said Nicolay was "very smart, thorough, hardworking" and brought "an incredible knowledge of the General Assembly to the table."

"He's good at what he does and takes it very seriously," Houlihan said, adding that the two have become good friends over the years. "This business can sometimes be rough-and-tumble, and John is very even-keeled."

She said Daniel L. Houlihan, her father and the Illinois State Bar Association's former lobbyist, thought so highly of Nicolay that he asked him to help serve as pro bono counsel to Misericordia/Heart of Mercy Home in Chicago, a residential facility for the developmentally disabled.

Nicolay also serves on its advisory board, as well as the board of trustees for MacMurray College and as the vice chairman of the Illinois Executive Mansion Association.

Watson said volunteering on boards is another example of Nicolay's giving ways. Watson said he even asked Nicolay to baby-sit his children when he was his intern. He took them to the water park and got rave reviews from the kids, Watson said..

"He would do anything. He's just that kind of guy," he said, adding that "when someone hires John, they are going to get their money's worth."