



KNOWLEDGE IS POWER

TRUST THE TEAM APPROACH AT GITTENS & ASSOCIATES

By Anna Delaney Photos Elsie Reid and Aamie Gillam

Combining the breadth of a general practice firm with the specialities of a boutique firm, Gittens & Associates is a truly unique law firm in Newfoundland and Labrador.

Located at 8 Kenna's Hill in the historic Stonehouse building, their St. John's location is one of two in the province. The other is in Labrador City to better serve

the population of Newfoundland and Labrador. Though Ernest Gittens is the senior and named partner of the firm, he is the first to dispel any myth of superiority. "The team approach is vitally important to us," Gittens says. "Everybody needs to know that even though they have different roles or perform different tasks, they are part of one process, with one objective...serving the client."

This team approach is echoed in the firm's structure. Unlike other boutique law firms that focus on one or two areas of law — for example, Personal Injury — at Gittens & Associates, they have practice groups within the firm to facilitate specialization. So, their clients get the expertise of a boutique firm with the advantages of a general practice. Each of their practice groups is led by a lawyer or paralegal and,

PHOTO ABOVE L-R Ernest Gittens, Kellie Cullihall, Leah Mazerolle, Renée Murphy, Katrina Hanlon, Stephen Orr

PHOTO TOP RIGHT L-R Leah Mazerolle, Kellie Cullihall, Stephen Orr; **PHOTO MIDDLE RIGHT L-R** Alex Kindervater, Sharon McKim-Ryan, Kellie Cullihall, Katrina Hanlon

depending on the group, will have two or three, and sometimes up to five or six, lawyers or paralegals working within that practice area.

The firm's eight practice groups include: Taxation, led by Ernest Gittens; Corporate and Commercial, led by Leah Mazerolle; Wills and Estates, led by Sharon McKim-Ryan; Real Estate, led by Nancy McKillop; Civil Litigation, led by J. Michael Cabot; Family Law, led by Kellie Cullihall; Criminal Law, led by Mark Gruchy; and Personal Injury, led by Renée Murphy. Whatever legal services their clients need, at whatever stage of their lives, there are experienced professionals at Gittens & Associates ready to help.

One of this firm's most noticeable attributes is its focus on courtroom advocacy. While some lawyers avoid court, Gittens notes, "The core function for us is litigation, this develops from my fundamental belief that the legal service industry is changing, because the legal industry is a knowledge-based industry."

With the population being better educated, and technology making knowledge so easily accessible via the Internet, anyone can go online and find legal information. "You can Google a will to get guidance on how to make your own," Gittens explains. "My perception is that what was exclusively within the jurisdiction of lawyers before, is now so widely available that it's hardly a commodity you can trade on," he says. "What we do have, that the general population doesn't have, is a skill set, the ability to take that knowledge and apply it in a courtroom setting to obtain a positive outcome for our clients."

A significant amount of the Gittens team's time, especially when compared to other law firms, is spent in court. "I feel it's important to maintain a court



“I’ve always wanted to be associated with a firm that was known for its expertise. I have never wanted us to be just another law firm.”



PHOTO RIGHT Ernest Gittens



PHOTO TOP LEFT L-R Stephen Orr, Ernest Gittens, Leah Mazerolle;
PHOTO MIDDLE LEFT Renée Murphy;
PHOTO BOTTOM LEFT Angie Mercer and Claudette O'Toole

presence in order to keep the team's advocacy skills sharp. It's easy to get comfortable in the office and avoid going into the courtroom," he says, but that gives the lawyers at Gittens & Associates an advantage over opposing counsel. Since they are a litigation-oriented firm, their courtroom skills don't get rusty. "We train the people within the firm to operate from a position of knowledge. The skill set they have they get because they keep practicing those skills. They keep going to court."

When asked about the amount of time an average lawyer at his firm would spend in court he smiles and quickly replies, "Well first of all, we don't have any average lawyers." He then explains it varies drastically amongst cases. A lawyer who practices criminal law could spend four out of five days in a given week in court. Family-practice lawyers might spend 10 to 12 days of a 20-workday month in court. While the team members at Gittens & Associates plan and prepare for court, most cases get settled along the way. "We operate on the premise that if you want peace, you prepare for war," Gittens says.

Quality control is another important aspect of the firm. Every month the lawyers report on every one of their files. These reports are reviewed and followed up on. Continuing education is also a top priority. They host regular meetings to discuss what is new in their field — whether that is new legislation, new court rules or anything else worth learning. "Every day some aspect of the law in your area is being changed," Gittens says. "There is a fair bit of emphasis on maintaining that knowledge base and on maintaining a level of mental toughness."

The team at Gittens & Associates is also heavily involved in the community, supporting causes ranging from mental health to the well-being of children. "It's hard to be involved in a service that involves the public and not participate in





PHOTO TOP L-R Katrina Hanlon, Sharon McKim-Ryan, Ernest Gittens, Kellie Cullihall, Stephen Orr; **PHOTO BOTTOM L-R** Stephen Orr, Kellie Cullihall, Ernest Gittens, Leah Mazerolle, Sharon McKim-Ryan, Michael Cabot

the community,” Gittens says. “It’s best if you are involved in things you care about. The firm has a policy that if a staff member is involved in any organization, the firm will support that organization.”

Whether it’s in court or in the community, the team at Gittens & Associates is prepared with the knowledge and skill needed for an exceptional quality of service. “We advocate strenuously for our clients. We take the provision of legal services very seriously,” Gittens says. “I’ve always wanted to be associated with a firm that was known for its expertise. I have never wanted us to be just another law firm.” ■

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