



Everybody Wants to See Joe Gagliardo

Why governors, mayors—and even Donald Trump—have consulted him

by NANCY SHEPHERDSON photography by LARRY MARCUS

You won't find much about Joe Gagliardo or his cases online. "My whole approach is to be discreet," says the Chicago labor and employment litigator. He has had more than his share of high-profile clients, including Illinois governors, Chicago mayors, Oprah Winfrey's Harpo Studios and Donald Trump. "If we're in the press, we're not doing our job right. I think it's an attraction for clients that I'm more interested in their concerns than mine."

It helps, too, that the managing partner of Laner, Muchin, Dombrow, Becker, Levin and Tominberg is committed to responding to every client request within two hours. He's made it a mantra of the firm.

Trump, hardly known for his patience, but well known for his capacity to fire people, continues to consult with Gagliardo, who represents both government and private-sector employers. Facing a work stoppage in the early stages of construction at the Trump International Hotel & Tower Chicago because of a labor dispute, Trump was referred to Gagliardo. "Joe fits our mode of operation," says Andy Weiss, executive vice president of design and construction with the Trump Organization. "We both say, 'Let's get to the point quickly and figure out a way to make it happen.' That keeps legal bills reasonable, too," Weiss adds with a laugh, "which Mr. Trump appreciates."

Gagliardo has also represented four governors. In 2009, Gov. Pat Quinn's office sent over a case involving 1,200 employees that required Gagliardo to coordinate the actions of 15 of the firm's lawyers. "We send a lot of 'hot-potato' cases to Joe," said Greg Newton, Quinn's former acting deputy general counsel for labor relations, at the time. "Grievances, lawsuits, the time-consuming, difficult cases—and we don't want them tried in the press. ... Whenever we contact him, very shortly we are talking to someone [at the firm] who knows the issue and is on the way to a solution."

"Joe is persuasive because he's reasonable," says retired U.S. District Judge Wayne Andersen. "He won't wave his arms and yell that he's right from A to Z. He doesn't take hard positions but tries to bring out differences quietly. When Joe raises his voice, you notice, because it happens so rarely."

Except on stage.

Twice a month, more often during the summer, Gagliardo plays bass guitar in a band with Dan Buck of the Boyzz from Illinoizz. This very same attorney who is the soul of discretion lays down a thumping beat as the audience sings along to "My Generation," "Hush," "Won't Get Fooled Again" and the band's originals.

"It's a great release," says Joe Annunzio, village attorney in Niles,

Joe Gagliardo

► **Managing partner, Laner, Muchin, Dombrow, Becker, Levin and Tomlinberg**

► **Chair, Litigation Department**

► **Illinois Super Lawyers 2005-2011**

► **Top 100 Illinois Super Lawyers 2007-2011**

► **Honors include: Distinguished Service Award from The John Marshall Law School**

who persuaded Gagliardo to return to his high school passion in 1999. “Where else can you stand in front of a microphone, scream at the top of your lungs and get applause?”

Gagliardo has even played with legends. In his cluttered office, with a 28th-floor view of Lake Michigan, the walls are covered with the usual awards, but there’s also a nicely framed triptych of Chuck Berry in concert. And right next to Berry, laying down a bass riff on a hot summer evening, is Gagliardo.

It happened out of the blue. One day in 2001, Gagliardo received a call from local rock promoter Ron Onesti, who, Gagliardo says, “thought of me because he had seen and heard me play, and felt I had an encyclopedic knowledge of music.” Onesti had a dilemma: Chuck Berry needed a band to play with him at Hawthorne Race Course. Little Richard would open, but there would be no time for rehearsal or sound check, and no song list. Could Gagliardo find a drummer and keyboardist and show up with his bass?

When he arrived at the racetrack, things didn’t get any clearer. “Key?” he asked Berry.

“No, man, we’re just going to play,” came the raspy reply.

And they did.

“To show his appreciation for our playing,” Gagliardo recalls, “[Berry] bowed before each one of us—me, a piano player and drummer—before he left the stage.”

Gagliardo learned in his parents’ Italian grocery near Wrigley Field to treat other people with respect. The store, long gone now, was an old-fashioned kind of place with wood floors and handmade meats. “I got a grounding there,” says Gagliardo. “I’ve never forgotten where I came up. With my father, it was all about being a good person and helping neighbors.”

The first in his family to attend college, Gagliardo says he was encouraged by his parents to practice law or medicine and escape the blue-collar life. Earlier, he had dreams of being a rock star but eventually concluded, “You can’t wait forever for lightning to strike.” He reluctantly gave up playing the bass after high school, and he worked at the grocery store to help pay for college at DePaul University and law school at John Marshall.

He was inspired to become a lawyer by a high school reading of *Gideon’s Trumpet*. “That book showed me that one lawyer [Abe Fortas] could change the law for the entire country and give everyone a right to counsel. Since I was raised to help people, I thought, ‘What better way to do it?’” he says.

After law school in 1977, Gagliardo didn’t send out a single résumé since he had no desire to work for a law firm—especially a big one. Instead, he went back to the old neighborhood as a sole practitioner. He knew the area needed legal representation, and who better than somebody everybody knew?

“Later that year, a neighbor told me I was doing it backward,” he says. “If I wanted to be successful as a lawyer for the people, I should get some experience working for government agencies.” Those, after all, were the offices that people in the neighborhood had the most dealings with—and the most trouble. He was also engaged and needed a little stability.

So Gagliardo applied to the city departments, “all of them,” he says, and in 1978 he was offered a job by the corporation counsel’s office under Mayor Michael Bilandic. It involved a lot of responsibility and a \$15,600 annual salary.

Over the next decade, as he climbed the ladder to first deputy corporation counsel, he worked under four mayors—five, he says, “if you count David Orr, who was only mayor for a few days.” He was involved in creating the hiring plan for Chicago’s implementation of the Shakman consent decrees, even though the political-patronage case started in 1969, when he was still in high school.

In the wake of Operation Greylord, which exposed rampant corruption in the metropolitan judicial system, he took a leading role in writing and implementing legislation to cure the nightmare that was traffic court. In those days, the 3 million tickets written in Chicago each year all had to be adjudicated, tying up courtrooms and judges, resulting in a logjam of cases and collections. Gagliardo testified before the state Senate that a lot of judges would be freed up to handle more important cases if traffic tickets could be paid by mail or satisfied by traffic school. “It wasn’t a good use of anybody’s time,” he says.

The value of treating everyone with respect that Gagliardo had learned from his family was reinforced by Mayor Harold Washington. “He showed me that the goal of government could be opening services to those not previously served and employment to those not previously considered,” Gagliardo says. In 2007, Laner Muchin won a Thomas L. Sager Award from the Minority Corporate Counsel Association for promoting diversity in hiring and promoting minority attorneys. Gagliardo is a longtime board member of Windows of Opportunity, which assists public-housing residents.

A problem-solver, Gagliardo was an early proponent of mediation, a technique that was largely unused in Chicago trial practice until 1992.

Such skills have also helped him and a team of lawyers get close to resolution of the, incredibly, 40-year-old Shakman case that has “bubbled up” again in his life as the result of a political-hiring case that sent three city officials to prison. Gagliardo has played a role in resolving issues between the city and the Shakman monitor, appointed to make certain that city hirings are not influenced by politics. Current monitor Noelle Brennan credits Gagliardo, as outside counsel for the city of Chicago, with an active role in resolving issues. The parties are continuing to make progress toward compliance, she says. “Joe was instrumental in drafting policies to get us here,” says Brennan. “He has the unique ability to be an adversary and friend at the same time.”

Bill Becker, former managing partner at Laner Muchin, met Gagliardo in the course of doing business as outside counsel for Mayor Harold Washington’s administration. On the recommendation of Becker and several other Laner Muchin partners, the firm hired Gagliardo away from the city in 1988 to set up a litigation practice. “But I became a jack of all trades,” Gagliardo says. Six years ago, when Becker joined Harpo Studios, he recommended Gagliardo as his replacement as managing partner.

“He has the qualities that are important to being managing partner,” says Becker. “His sensitivity to people and his skills as a litigator are magical. Running a law firm well is a combination of tremendous attention to detail and sensitivity to the politics of herding cats. Joe was always a savvy lawyer with a very human side.” ◀

ILLINOIS THE TOP 100

An alphabetical listing of the lawyers who ranked top of the list in the 2015 Illinois Super Lawyers nomination, research and blue ribbon review process

Addy, Meredith Martin, Katten Muchin Rosenman, Chicago

Adelman, Howard L., Adelman & Gettleman, Chicago

Anderson, Kimball R., Winston & Strawn, Chicago

Ashley, Anthony J., Vedder Price, Chicago

Balesteri, Joseph W., Power Rogers & Smith, Chicago

Baughner, Peter V., Schopf & Weiss, Chicago

Beck, Philip S., Bartlit Beck Herman Palenchar & Scott, Chicago

Beermann, Miles N., Beermann Pritikin Mirabelli Swerdlove, Chicago

Bennett, Margaret A., Bennett Law Firm, Oak Brook

Berkeley, Jill B., Neal Gerber & Eisenberg, Chicago

Berkowitz, Sean M., Latham & Watkins, Chicago

Brown, Deane B., Hughes Socol Piers Resnick & Dym, Chicago

Clifford, Robert A., Clifford Law Offices, Chicago

Cohen, Leslie M., Hershman Cohen, Chicago

DeBofsky, Mark D., DeBofsky & Associates, Chicago

Demetrio, Thomas A., Corboy & Demetrio, Chicago

Duston, Thomas L., Marshall Gerstein & Borun, Chicago

Eaton, J. Timothy, Taft Stettinius & Hollister, Chicago

Elbert, Angela R., Neal Gerber & Eisenberg, Chicago

Elden, Gary M., Grippo & Elden, Chicago

Feinstein, Paul L., Law Offices of Paul L. Feinstein, Chicago

Filip, Mark, Kirkland & Ellis, Chicago

Finkel, Leon I., Berger Schatz, Chicago

Fisher, Ian H., Schopf & Weiss, Chicago

Flowers, Peter J., Meyers & Flowers, St. Charles

Franczek, Jr., James C., Franczek Radelet, Chicago

JOSEPH M. GAGLIARDO
LANER MUCHIN, CHICAGO

Griffin, Hugh C., Hall Prangle & Schoonveld, Chicago

Hartmann, H. Michael, Leydig Voit & Mayer, Chicago

Healy, Jr., Martin, Healy Scanlon Law Firm, Chicago

Heneghan, Patrick J., Schopf & Weiss, Chicago

Hilliard, David C., Pattishall McAuliffe Newbury Hilliard & Geraldson, Chicago

Hoerman, Tor, TorHoerman Law, Chicago

Horwitch, Mark H., Tabet DiVito & Rothstein, Chicago

Hurley, Christopher T., Hurley McKenna & Mertz, Chicago

John, Peter C., Williams Montgomery & John, Chicago

Kagan, Linda S., Attorney at Law, Chicago

Kelly, Adam G., Loeb & Loeb, Chicago

Klein, Daniel A., Kurasch & Klein, Chicago

Kraus, Kenneth E., FrausFlaming, Chicago

Kuzniar, Pamela J., Kuzniar & Simons, Chicago

Larson, Anne E., Ogletree Deakins Nash Smoal & Stewart, Chicago

Laurie, Ty D., Laurie & Brennan, Chicago

Lending, Randall M., Vedder Price, Chicago

Levin, Steven M., Levin & Perconti, Chicago

Levy, David H., Berger Schatz, Chicago

Litt, Paula E., Schopf & Weiss, Chicago

Lyerla, Bradford P., Jenner & Block, Chicago

Macey, Eric N., Novack and Macey, Chicago

Manzo, Edward D., Husch Blackwell, Chicago

Mascherin, Terri L., Jenner & Block, Chicago

Masters, Douglas N., Loeb & Loeb, Chicago

Mazura, Adrienne C., Quarles & Brady, Chicago

McNabola, Edward (Ted), McNabola Law Group, Chicago

McNabola, Mark E., McNabola Law Group, Chicago

Minton, Kerryann Haase, Michael Best & Friedrich, Chicago

Monico, Michael D., Monico & Spevack, Chicago

Montgomery, C. Barry, Williams Montgomery & John, Chicago

Mossing, Adria East, Mossing & Navarre, Chicago

Napleton, Robert J., Motherway & Napleton, Chicago

Nicholson, Jill, Foley & Lardner, Chicago

Novack, Stephen, Novack and Macey, Chicago

Novosad, Susan L., Levin & Perconti, Chicago

O'Donnell, Margo Wolf, Vedder Price, Chicago

Olson, Camille A., Seyfarth Shaw, Chicago

Palmerheim, Robert J., Schopf & Weiss, Chicago

Perconti, John J., Levin & Perconti, Chicago

Peterman, Nancy A., Greenberg Traurig, Chicago

Pfaff, Bruce R., Pfaff Gill & Ports, Chicago

Pope, Michael A., McDermott Will & Emery, Chicago

Power, Jr., Joseph A., Power Rogers & Smith, Chicago

Prindable, Thomas K., Clifford Law Offices, Chicago

Reagan, Michael T., Law Offices of Michael T. Reagan, Ottawa

Reidy, Daniel E., Jones Day, Chicago

Remus, Mark H., Katten Muchin Rosenman, Chicago

Rotert, Mark L., Stetler Duffy & Rotert, Chicago

Rubin, James I., Butler Rubin Saltarelli & Boyd, Chicago

Safer, Ronald S., Schiff Hardin, Chicago

Salpeter, Alan N., Kaye Scholer, Chicago

Salvi, Patrick A., Salvi Schostok & Pritchard, Chicago

Scanlon, John P., Healy Scanlon Law Firm, Chicago

Schatz, Barry A., Berger Schatz, Chicago

Schwartz, Esther Joy, Stellato & Schwartz, Chicago

Siegel, Marc J., The Siegel Group, Chicago

Slovak, Patricia C., Schiff Hardin, Chicago

Smith, Todd A., Power Rogers & Smith, Chicago

Spears, Natalie J., Dentons, Chicago

Stein, Max A., Boodell & Domanskis, Chicago

Stein, Steven G.M., Stein Ray, Chicago

Stone, Jeffrey E., McDermott Will & Emery, Chicago

Strand, Peter J., Leavens Strand & Glover, Chicago

Suskin, Howard S., Jenner & Block, Chicago

Tilson, Joseph E., Meckler Bulger Tilson Marick & Pearson, Chicago

Vail, Andrew W., Jenner & Block, Chicago

Valukas, Anton R., Jenner & Block, Chicago

Veugeler, Kevin T., Healy Scanlon Law Firm, Chicago

Vincent, Joshua G., Hinshaw & Culbertson, Chicago

Webb, Dan K., Winston & Strawn, Chicago

Weiss, Steven A., Schopf & Weiss, Chicago

Wortel, William J., Bryan Cave, Chicago

THE TOP 10

ADDY, MEREDITH MARTIN
Katten Muchin Rosenman, Chicago

ADELMAN, HOWARD L.
Adelman & Gettleman, Chicago

CLIFFORD, ROBERT A.
• Ranked Number One •
Clifford Law Offices, Chicago

DEMETRIO, THOMAS A.
• Ranked Number Two •
Corboy & Demetrio, Chicago

JOSEPH M. GAGLIARDO
LANER MUCHIN, CHICAGO

SALVI, PATRICK A.
Salvi Schostok & Pritchard, Chicago

SUSKIN, HOWARD S.
Jenner & Block, Chicago

VALUKAS, ANTON R.
Jenner & Block, Chicago

WEBB, DAN K.
• Ranked Number Three •
Winston & Strawn, Chicago

WEISS, STEVEN A.
Schopf & Weiss, Chicago