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Openness, collegiality keep this staff motivated

★ 1ST PLACE ★

TAYLOR DUANE

Company Location: 10 Dorrance St., Suite 800, Providence
Number of Employees: 28 (16 attorneys, 12 staff)
CEO (or equivalent): John Barton, founding partner
Most proud of... "We share the wealth. If we have a blanket windfall, we involve everyone in a special distribution, staff, paralegals and administration all benefit from those sorts of things."
— John Barton, founding partner

BY PAUL E. KANDARIAN

CONTRIBUTING WRITER



PBN PHOTO/RUPERT WHITELEY

ALL IN THE FAMILY: Taylor Duane Barton & Gilman employees, from left: associate Sara Sweeney, partner John Barton, attorney Angela Carr, partner Francis Connor III. Barton says that part of the appeal of working for the company is its family feel.

Some call it Pleasantville or The People's Republic.

The official name is **Taylor Duane Barton & Gilman LLP** in Providence and Boston, a firm of trial attorneys that is such a great place to work, it prompts some to label it the above-mentioned terms, laughed John Barton, a founding partner.

"We're pretty unusual in the way we run things," said Barton, a Rhode Island native who now lives in central Massachusetts to make life easier for his veterinarian wife, who works there. "We have a rather democratic approach to things."

For one thing, he said, everyone there knows how much everyone else earns, something held close to the corporate vest at most companies, let alone law firms. Not only that, workers decide who makes what.

"We have a compensation committee, usually comprised of three partners and one associate, and they determine what all the attorneys make, top to bottom," Barton said. "Not only does everyone know what the senior attorneys make, they decide what they'll make."

"That," he said of the firm, which made Providence Business News' Best Places to Work list in 2008, 2009 and 2010 "may strike others as socialistic or at least unusual."

The same is true with staff pay, he said; his senior administrator, who started with Barton as a paralegal and now runs the business side of the firm, deter-

mines, with her assistant, what secretaries and others make.

One huge appeal of working there, he said, is the family feel of the place, everyone helping everyone else, up to and including feeding babies of the highest echelon of partners.

"I was talking to my secretary of 17 years the other day and she reminded me when she first started here, she would answer the phone with one hand, and bottle-feed my daughter with the other," Barton laughed.

That closeness is echoed by Sara Sweeney, a junior associate in the Providence office and Rhode Island native who clerked for R.I. Supreme Court Justice Paul A. Suttell in 2007 and serves on the board of the Rhode Island Women's Bar Association.

"One thing I noticed right off the bat was the openness and accessibility of the partners," she said. "Anyone, a secretary or paralegal or junior lawyer, can walk

into a partner's office and discuss a case. You feel there's a definite team approach, we all feel we have a stake in the work the team puts out."

Sweeney said everyone is free to "talk about cases with each other, bounce ideas off each other. People are more than will-

ing to open their books and give you briefs, case law; I found that to be so refreshing in a profession like this, which can be very competitive. To feel like you have a team behind you, it makes a difference."

At many firms, Barton said, there is a distinct separation of upper and lower levels of partners and staff. Not on his watch, he said.

"For example, we don't have a corporate lunch room, we have one. We all eat together, tell stories," he said. "We're all good friends, inside and out of the office."

Community service is a huge part of what the firm does, Barton said, getting down and dirty to do it. Employees chipped in recently to build a basketball

court in the inner city, lawyers and staffers alike digging holes and moving earth.

The firm has also been a primary sponsor of the Manton Avenue Project's spring-benefit theater performance, a collaboration between students and Rhode Island media and political figures. Firm attorneys Matthew R. Plain and Elizabeth Merritt serve on the project's board, and attorney Timothy J. Groves serves on the Executive Director's Council of the San Miguel School in Providence.

"We have a lot of fun. We work hard, and we play hard," Barton said. "In May, we had a Cinco de Mayo party. The firm didn't organize it, the staff said it would be fun so we said, 'go for it.' They ordered Mexican, decorated the conference room, had a pin-the-tail-on-the-donkey thing and smashed a piñata. It was just out of the blue."

The firm isn't huge, with some 33 lawyers in Boston and Providence (16 in Providence) and 22 staffers, and is looking to stay that way, Barton said.

"We're averse to big growth, we're cautious," he said. "We're fortunate in these economic times the work continues to come in. Last year we hired five attorneys firm-wide, less this year, if any."

Still, the partnership is one of the 10 largest law firms in Rhode Island, he said, one that does medical malpractice defense, also complex reinsurance litigation issues and product liability. The law firm was founded in Boston in 1995, and Barton opened the Providence office (firm origins trace back to 1984).

Though the firm practices in specific areas, it is open to suggestion from any worker on expanding.

"We have emerging, new specialties. We say if you want to do education law, for example, and we don't have it, do it, research it, we'll support you," Barton said. "That was the genesis of me coming to Rhode Island. I grew up here and thought we needed a Rhode Island office to help Boston. It's worked very well."

Life in 'The People's Republic' at the firm is good, Barton said, where everyone knows your first name.

"This is a town where staff call attorneys 'Mr. So and So,' and I say 'Mr.' because the legal profession is still heavily male," Barton said (his firm partners are 12 in number, seven male, five female). "But here, it's all on a first-name basis." ■

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SARA SWEENEY

Taylor Duane
Barton & Gilman
junior associate