

Finding a voice: IP boutique partners reflect on quitting ‘big law’

To mark the firm’s one-year anniversary, partners at **Groombridge Wu Baughman & Stone** reveal the biggest challenges of getting a new firm off the ground

Jennifer Wu didn’t decide to leave her role as a partner at Paul Weiss because she wanted a ping-pong table.

But shortly after she and her colleagues formed Groombridge Wu Baughman & Stone in November 2022, she decided to get one for the new office.

“That was very exciting. Other people get excited about other things, but that made me feel like I’ve made it because I had a ping-pong table and I’ve always wanted one since I was a kid,” Wu said.

The ping-pong table is just one example of something that Wu, along with her co-founding partners Nicholas Groombridge, Steve Baughman, Eric Stone, and their colleagues have more control over since they founded the now seven-partner firm.

Groombridge and Wu spoke to *Managing IP* about what it’s like to work at their own IP boutique, the greatest challenges of forming the firm, and what their hopes were for their first year.

What are the biggest differences between working at a boutique compared to a large firm?

Wu: For me, it’s the speed with which you can make decisions. It’s just night and day. When there are six (or seven) partners, you can make decisions much more quickly.



I was at the National Asian Pacific American Bar Association (NAPABA) convention this month, and one of the first things we did was sponsor it at the higher level. Those things are harder at a bigger firm because there are a lot of competing interests.

It’s just a lot more fun on a personal level to know that my voice is being heard and matters in a very real way. People are more invested because you know there are fewer voices.

Groombridge: There’s a new sense of freedom and you can do anything and get it done in a way that makes you feel empowered.

I was just discussing health insurance because the carrier we’ve been using discontinued the type of coverage that we want.

Now I’m trying to figure out what’s the best option. I would never be in that situation at a large firm because

there would be a department that would deal with it. It's just not a decision I would make.

But it directly impacts the life of everyone at the firm. So, on one level it's a headache, but we can make decisions that are in the best interests of our colleagues and that's profoundly satisfying.

Wu: I feel like my associates are more loyal to us now than they were before. We do free lunches on Wednesdays and there's a lot of input on where we should be ordering from. I like the agency people show even if it's just picking lunch or picking drinks.

People do speak up more. They say an idea, and it's implemented.

I did feel like, as a partner at a big firm, associates were reluctant or didn't have the energy to make the place better. Here, people feel they have control in terms of making things better.

What were your goals for the first year?

Groombridge: I had hoped that we would have a start-up environment and we certainly seem to have that. There's a sense of possibility and being open to looking around for new ways of doing things.

I also had hopes that the bulk of our client cases would come with us and that we would be operating at the same level as we were operating and that has happened.

Wu: There were times when I felt like 'big law' wasn't responsive to people of my generation. One of my goals was to build a happy law firm. It's not an accident that one of the first things we did was to promote two women and our partnership reflects what the next generation wants to see.

In law firms, we typically don't have equity when it comes to minorities and women. When I was being put up for partner (at Paul Weiss) I had some reservations about joining a boys' club that I felt I didn't belong to.

At a lot of 'big law' places I didn't necessarily want to be partner. I would look around and wonder: "Why do I want to be partner? Is it so I can make you look good and make you look like you're diverse? Is that my role?"

Part of my goal (at Groombridge Wu) was to build a law firm where people would be inspired by looking at the partners and would actually want to be a partner.

Knowing so many of my friends who are women or the first person of colour at a law firm, they carry the mental and physical load of all the diversity work. It was a

weight off my back to come to this firm and have two other women partners who are also carrying the load.

Was it hard to get clients to come with you?

Groombridge: Sometimes when people leave a firm you get into fights over who will get the work. In our case, it wasn't really like that. We didn't have to persuade people to come with us.

But the first client we talked to was Amgen. They were instantly enthusiastic and basically asked us what they could do to support us. That kind of reaction was really, really gratifying.

Wu: Our clients were more excited for us than we were for ourselves at times. It was interesting that they saw that we could be happier on our own.

At the end of the day, your clients want the best for you. I had never quit 'big law' before. But it turns out, every one of my clients had. They completely empathised with us. It's almost like when you have a kid and all these other mothers have been through labour too.

All my clients asked: "Isn't it freeing?" And I thought "Wow, now I'm part of the club!"

What were the biggest challenges in getting the firm off the ground?

Wu: For me, it's all the things I didn't know. If someone told me I'd have to pick paint colours for decorating the office, I'd have thought: "What are you talking about?"

You have to figure out what billing system to use and the document management system. We knew the practice of law and how to pitch business, but the operation of running the room was new.

Groombridge: The biggest challenge was getting all these pieces together. We had a little bit of time to get things up and running but it was really only a few weeks.

The biggest challenge wasn't the work, it was creating the infrastructure.

But because it's a challenge, there's a great sense of accomplishment in having done it.

Groombridge Wu Baughman & Stone works on matters in district courts, the Court of Appeals for the Federal Circuit, the International Trade Commission, and the Patent Trial and Appeal Board. The seven-partner firm has offices in New York, Washington DC and Tokyo.