

"We Don't Dabble at Groom": An Interview

An Interview with Andree M. St. Martin

Andree M. St. Martin has been practicing employee benefits law since she graduated from Harvard Law School in 1983. She began her career as a litigator in the Department of Labor, then became the Associate General Counsel of the United Mine Workers Health and Retirement Funds, a group of large multiemployer pension and welfare plans. Since joining Groom in 1994, Andree has achieved a national reputation for her work with clients throughout the benefits community on a broad range of ERISA issues and disputes. As she demonstrated in a recent interview, she also happens to have a lot to say about what it means to be an attorney—and what it means to be an attorney working at Groom.

Q: You brought two different props to your portrait session for Groom's new web site—a set of three tennis balls and a poster. Why them?

A: I was hoping the photographer could catch me as I was juggling the three balls and had all three of them in the air at the same time. He pulled it off. It's a great shot, don't you think?

I wanted to be shown with the balls in the air because it represents the juggling that I do in my work and in my personal life. Our practice requires helping our clients to balance and manage their often-multiple roles and responsibilities as employers, businesses, and plan fiduciaries—and helping them to do that while treating each and every one of their problems as the serious matter that it is. And of course juggling work and home obligations is a challenge faced by each of us at Groom and by our clients as well. The juggling can be a real struggle at times—but also immensely rewarding.

The poster is a classic from World War II. It features "Rosie the Riveter" with the slogan, "We Can Do It." It expresses my commitment to finding creative solutions to our clients' sophisticated legal problems in a positive way. All of us here take pride on being highly responsive, technically proficient, and creative. We can do it.

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Q: You joined the Department of Labor right after you graduated from Harvard Law in 1983, and you've been practicing the law ever since. Did you always intend to become an attorney?

A: It was more a matter of genes, I think. I was following in my father's footsteps. He was a sole practitioner in a small town in Louisiana for almost fifty years and handled just about everything in his practice--small business transactions, litigation, wills. He was even a part-time assistant D.A. for years.

As a kid, I went with him to his modest storefront office and to our small parish courthouse. At the courthouse, I saw the easy familiarity and camaraderie he enjoyed with the parish's community of lawyers, judges, clerks, and deputy sheriffs. I watched with pride as he tried cases in that courthouse before jurors who were our neighbors and the parents of my schoolmates. He painted pictures in that courtroom, and he was a true master at it. And he did it with great humor.

At his office, I heard him talk—and listen—to a diverse group of clients, treating them all with a quiet respect. I watched him (and sometimes "helped" him) consult the impressive looking law books that lined his library as he constructed solutions to the problems of his neighbors and friends in longhand on clean yellow legal pads. I thought of him as the consummate problem-solver, and saw that he was respected in our small part of the world for his contribution.

So it's hard to say that I always *intended* to become a lawyer, but watching my father practice his profession and admiring what he did—well, I would not be a lawyer today had I not seen so intimately what an honorable and rewarding path it might be.

Q: You've been at Groom since the early 90's. What brought you to the firm—and what keeps you there?

A: Groom's reputation as the premier benefits firm in the country brought me here. Our continued commitment to being the go-to firm for employee benefits law is one of the main reasons I've stayed. It's more or less required that an attorney here master her or his practice area. This sense of mastery is professionally and intellectually rewarding. Not only that, but because the products, services, and trends in employee benefits are so

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complex and are constantly changing, we are continually challenged to learn new and important issues in our area of the law if we want to maintain our reputation as the foremost experts in our line of work.

Q: Is this what you say to clients who are thinking about retaining the firm?

A: Not really. I don't think our clients are particularly interested in what brings us into the office everyday. They want to know why they should come to us with their benefits problems.

One thing they learn about us pretty quickly is that we don't dabble at Groom. We focus deeply and extensively on one thing—employee benefits law—and each of us is a bona fide expert in one or more sub-specialties. This has all sorts of advantages for our clients. While we're all excellent 'issue spotters,' we don't have to individually reinvent the wheel on our client's nickel when it's likely that one of our Groom colleagues has previously handled a similar issue. And when one of us is presented with a particularly knotty problem, there's always a colleague or two—or several—who have encountered that problem and can help to come up with a creative and workable solution to it. We take a cooperative approach to the way we practice here that not only produces the best results for our clients but is really efficient. It ends up saving them money.

Q: Not to be too cynical, but if you go to just about any law firm's web site, they talk about how they all work together—how cooperative they are and how they pull together to help their clients. The words don't exactly match the public's image—

A: You don't even have to finish the question. I know where you're coming from. And yes, you hear a lot of fancy words from law firms about how they're all on the same team and all that stuff. But our commitment to cooperation is not an ideal or an abstraction. It's how we do our work and it's really the *only* way we can do our work in a field that is so complex. We believe that every attorney at the firm—from the "wet behind the ears" associate to the most wizened veteran—can contribute to problem-solving. Since there's such a tremendous range of employee benefits experience and problem-solving approaches among the attorneys at Groom, the most creative solutions are usually the result of teamwork.

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In other words, we truly have a collegial practice. I know that sounds like a cliché. But it happens to be true. It's a big part of what makes us who we are as professionals. And it's an approach to problem-solving that provides the maximum benefit to clients.

It's also a really fun way to practice law.