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There's no business like show business

Swanson, Martin & Bell has big dreams for new entertainment and media practice group

BY ROY STROM

Law Bulletin staff writer

Jeffrey S. Becker honed his craft — the entertainment and media law practice — representing clients pro bono for Lawyers for the Creative Arts.

Then Becker, an associate at the litigation firm Swanson, Martin & Bell LLP, got some paying gigs representing singer-songwriters, record labels and other entertainment companies.

He got what could be called a big break earlier this year when he and his firm became local counsel for the major music publishers behind hip-hop artist Nicki Minaj. The publishers are defending in Chicago's federal court a claim that her hit song "Starships" was stolen from a local, little-known artist.

What started from Becker's interest in creative pursuits was announced this week as a formal, eight-lawyer media and entertainment practice at his firm.

"Swanson, Martin & Bell (has) been very good at letting their attorneys carve out their own niche practices in areas they think are interesting and fun," said Becker, who participated in theater and show choir until his sophomore year at Illinois Wesleyan University and once considered trying his luck as an

actor in Los Angeles.

"I find helping creative people and working in the creative arts to be quite fun."

The firm hopes the practice can take advantage of what Becker called an "explosion" of movie and TV activity in Chicago in recent years as well as the city's courts being a "hotbed" for high-profile trademark infringement lawsuits, such as the Minaj case.

The move to formalize the practice came after founding partner Brian W. Bell worked on a media and entertainment case with Becker earlier this year. While Bell and the firm had known Becker was developing an entertainment practice, Bell said he realized its potential after asking Becker to put together a business plan.

"When these young people came to me and said they not only wanted to do entertainment law but also had a lot of significant business contacts in the area, our firm supported that fully," Bell said. "It's the young people that are really driving the business."

Bell said he encouraged the young lawyers to form a formal practice group, to provide a description of their work and accomplishments and to do a mailing to all of the contacts they



Jeffrey S. Becker

had in the industry.

"I have to tell you that the clients and future prospective clients have been very responsive," Bell said.

For a firm that is well-known for its litigation work and which prides itself on its trial ability, Bell said, the corporate-style representation of artists and media companies is a bit of a change.

"Our strength has always been in trial work," Bell said. "But some of our younger people have taken the time to develop expertise in other areas and we want to encourage that. But acting as a litigator always gives you the critical thinking skills you need that can be used in other areas."

In addition to Becker, members of the new practice are P. Stephen Fardy, Richard J.

Keating Jr.,

Jonna McGinley Reilly, Christopher T. Sheehan, Michelle M. Wahl, Darren B. Watts and Keely V. Lewis Wise.

Becker, an intellectual property attorney, was discovered in entertainment law almost by accident while working at a former firm.

The son of a musician told his father that he heard one of his father's songs playing in one of the "Grand Theft Auto" series of video games.

The musician then hired Becker's former firm to assist him in determining how the song ended up in the game without a license. Becker represented the man in negotiating a settlement.

"That was my first experience with what was the same kind of work I'd done before — copyright infringement — but it was in the music space, and not software. I thought this is really cool," Becker said.

He developed his practice at his current firm by speaking often at industry events, picking up pro bono work from Lawyers for the Creative Arts and word-of-mouth referrals. He said he hopes Chicago can become a regional hub for the entertainment and media law practice.

"There's New York lawyers and there's L.A. lawyers" in the entertainment practice, Becker said. "But guess what? The flight's a lot shorter for us to get to either one of those regions than it would be for either one of them ... to go across the country."