

How I Made It | Law Firm Partners

How I Made Partner: 'Lean Into the Hard Work,' Says Stephen Kudla of Marshall Gerstein

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Stephen Kudla of Marshall, Gerstein & Borun. Courtesy photo

[Stephen J. Kudla](#), 33,
Partner at Marshall,

Gerstein & B

Gerstein & Borun, Chicago, Illinois

Practice area: Patent prosecution

Law school and year of graduation: The George Washington University Law School, 2018

The following has been edited for style.

How long have you been at the firm?

I've practiced with Marshall Gerstein for almost seven years.

What was your criteria in selecting your current firm?

From the beginning, the client base at Marshall Gerstein stood out to me as very impressive. I wanted to serve sophisticated clients with their highly technical IP needs, and the firm had—and still has—an exceptional roster, particularly for our size. That was a major factor for me—I take pride in the quality and impact of my work, and having clients who value that level of technical rigor was essential. In hindsight, the most valuable aspect of this firm has turned out to be the people. I've been fortunate to work with colleagues who are collaborative, invested, and incredibly sharp. At the outset, that's just harder to judge.

Were you an associate at another firm before joining your present firm? If so, which one and how long were you there?

No, I've been at Marshall Gerstein since the start of my legal career. I did an internship at a law firm in Texas, but my first full-time role has been here, and I've grown

up professionally within this environment

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What do you think was the deciding point for the firm in making you partner? Was it your performance on a specific case? A personality trait? Making connections with the right people?

I don't think it was a single moment or a specific case that made the difference. From my perspective, becoming partner material is about demonstrating consistent, steady growth over time. I worked hard to improve my technical skills, increased my efficiency and output, and built a reputation internally as someone who could take on complex, high-value matters. I was intentional about accepting challenging assignments and pushing my own boundaries, and over time, I think that has been recognized and valued.

Who had or has the greatest influence in your career and why?

Two people come to mind immediately for different reasons: Drew Bateman and Paul Stephens, both partners here at Marshall Gerstein. Drew pushed me to become a sharper thinker and a more effective communicator, especially in my writing. His guidance helped me develop core skills in legal reasoning and client advocacy. Paul's influence has been broader; he helped shape how I carry myself as a professional, manage client relationships, and contribute to our firm's culture.

What stands out most is that both of them clearly invested in my success. They didn't just give feedback; they mentored me, and that's made all the difference.

What advice would you give an associate who wants to make partner?

to make partner.

Lean into the hard work, especially the assignments that are technically demanding or outside your comfort zone. In my view, what sets people apart is their willingness to tackle difficult matters and persevere through the learning curve. That's how you build trust and demonstrate leadership potential. There's no shortcut, but if you're consistent, dependable, and unafraid of a challenge, that goes a long way.

When it comes to career planning and navigating inside a law firm, in your opinion, what's the most common mistake you see other attorneys making?

I've seen attorneys gravitate toward staying in their comfort zone, sticking to one client, one technical subject area, or only taking on less complex work. In IP law, especially, that can really limit your growth. Our field spans a broad range of technologies, and being willing to take on matters outside your formal academic background is key. You have to be adaptable and willing to become an expert in new areas on a short-term basis. Otherwise, you risk getting pigeonholed, and that can make it harder to evolve as your career progresses.

What challenges, if any, did you face or have to overcome in your career path, and what was the lesson learned? How did it affect or influence your career?

Early in my career, I wasn't always proactive about asking for feedback. That delayed my development a bit because I'd occasionally receive marked-up drafts without context and make incorrect assumptions about why changes were made. That's a tough way to

learn. I've since realized how important it is to seek out

learn. I've since realized how important it is to seek out clarification and understand not just what to change, but why. Feedback is an investment in your growth, but you may have to ask for it, especially if it's not given by some supervisors as a matter of course.

Knowing what you know now about your career path, what advice would you give to your younger self?

Don't shy away from feedback, even when it's tough to hear. It's easy to feel defensive when your writing or legal reasoning is criticized, but it's part of the process. More importantly, pay attention to who is giving you meaningful, thoughtful feedback: Those are often the people who are invested in your success. Work with them, learn from them, and let their mentorship shape your growth. That kind of support can be a game-changer.

How do you utilize technology to benefit the firm/practice and/or business development?

Artificial intelligence (AI) is increasingly influential, and our firm has developed a private AI instance that we use regularly to assist with many of our more routine tasks. Because it's internal, we can use it safely, even when dealing with sensitive material. We also utilize several third-party analytics tools (e.g., Juristat) to enhance our workflows, such as to obtain examiner-specific statistics, which enable us to tailor our strategies and provide more informed advice to clients. These tools have improved our efficiency and added a new layer of insight to our practice.

How would you describe your work mindset?

I'd describe it as diligent, analytical, and team-oriented.

My academic background is in physics and math, and I

My academic background is in physics and math, and I typically approach problems with a theoretical mindset but apply it practically. Even though much of our work is done independently in the practice of IP law, I believe in the importance of collaboration. There's almost always a point where ideas and effort converge with outside direction or perspective to create the best outcome.

Do you have any advice for improving work-life balance or promoting mental wellness to avoid burnout and maintain your career momentum?

Absolutely, this is something our firm is increasingly attentive to, not just as a talking point but as a real priority. There's a growing recognition that long-term success in this profession isn't just about working hard; it's about working sustainably. Mental wellness and career longevity go hand in hand, and we've seen that investing in both leads to stronger teams and better outcomes for clients.

From a personal standpoint, one strategy that's helped me is balancing long-form assignments with shorter, more manageable tasks. Drafting a patent application, for example, can take several days and demand intense focus. If that's all you do for a week straight, it's easy to hit a wall. So, I try to intersperse those projects with shorter assignments, like office action responses, that provide a mental reset and a sense of progress. It's a practical way to stay engaged without burning out.

At the firm level, we're having more open conversations about capacity, workload and boundaries. There's an understanding that preserving our people's well-being ultimately strengthens the firm. We're building a culture where pacing yourself, asking for help when needed

while pacing yourself, asking for help when needed, and taking breaks are not seen as weaknesses, but as smart and professional habits.

If you participate in firm or industry initiatives, please mention the initiatives you are working on as well as the impact you hope to achieve.

Internally at Marshall Gerstein, I'm involved in several committees, including recruiting and professional development, where I focus on helping new hires succeed and ensuring that our firm remains a great place to grow. I also serve on the pro bono committee. While our IP work doesn't always lend itself easily to pro bono, we still prioritize it. I've participated in programs like Wills for Heroes in Chicago. These initiatives give us a chance to give back meaningfully while supporting the broader legal community and public interest.

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