

## ON A ROLL

### David Doggett Drives the Legal Department at The Scooter Store

BY JEANNE GRAHAM

Just one year ago, David Doggett was worrying about whether he was booking enough billable hours. Now he is responsible for paying the bills for hours booked by other attorneys.

In August 2002, Doggett became the vice president of the legal department at The Scooter Store, a company that has been growing by leaps and bounds since it opened in 1991. During the past 12 months, Doggett built an in-house legal department while managing multiple projects performed by outside counsel. "It's been a great challenge and a lot of fun," he says.

Headquartered in New Braunfels, The Scooter Store markets and sells motorized wheelchairs and scooters to senior citizens and customers with physical limitations. Revenue for the privately held company totaled \$160 million in 2002 and is projected to exceed \$300 million this year, Doggett says. The company ended 1998 with just 59 employees. Now it employs 1,362 people. Doggett is the sole attorney in a five-person legal department that includes two paralegals and two administrative employees. He also is responsible for the company's seven-person tax department. Doggett declines to discuss his salary, citing the company's policy of keeping such information confidential.

Doggett, 36, was a tax shareholder in Matthews and Branscomb in San Antonio for nine years before taking the in-house position. He says the greatest challenge for an in-house lawyer is dealing with an incredible breadth of legal issues. "I just tried to make a list of the practice areas I touch on now, and it's amazing," he says. The practice areas include commercial real estate, partnerships, labor, personal

injury, contracts, antitrust, intellectual property and consumer law.

But Doggett doesn't do much legal work himself anymore. "I spend a lot more time managing the legal function as opposed to performing legal work," he says. "I have precious little time to actually sit down and work on legal projects. I really send just about everything out."

Doggett says he has used attorneys with 15 different firms nationwide, pay-

ally – as the company grows even more – he won't have time to handle each outside project and probably will rely on a limited number of firms with senior partners managing the various attorneys.

How does he select outside counsel? Doggett says being active in the San Antonio Bar Association has helped him in this quest. Doggett is a former chairman of the San Antonio Bar Association's International Law Section and

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ing rates ranging from \$125 to \$600 per hour. "There's a huge variance depending on the importance and sophistication of the work," he says of the fees.

There are two different ways to approach the management of outside counsel, Doggett says. One method is to hire a firm and have one of the senior partners manage the work of the various practice areas.

"It's very convenient for an in-house [counsel] to do that because the daily management is handled by someone else," Doggett says. "But that's not the model I follow. Instead, I decide the specific lawyer I want to engage for specific work." This way, Doggett says, he can better control the projects and clearly define the objectives and work projects he requires. But he also says that eventu-

a former corporate secretary of the San Antonio Young Lawyers Association. "It helps to know a lot of people," Doggett says. "Through bar activities, you get to learn about lawyers and firms and their reputations."

Doggett surveys fellow San Antonio Bar members and former colleagues for references and also contacts other in-house attorneys for advice. He hired an attorney with expertise in employee stock ownership plans (ESOPs) after hearing the attorney's presentation at an ESOP seminar. Doggett followed up with the attorney by having a meeting and interview.

In addition to handing off specific projects or problems to outside counsel, Doggett has set up a system in which he has two attorneys - labor lawyer Julie

Truss, a San Antonio solo, and general business lawyer Julie Perez, an associate with the San Antonio office of Oppenheimer Blend Harrison & Tate – each spend one day a week working with him at the company’s headquarters. “This allows them to become more integrated into our company,” he says. “It produces some of the efficiencies gained from being in-house, without the long-term commitment required for a full-time employee.”

## IN SHAPE

While growing up in Houston as the son of a vascular surgeon, Doggett was interested in biology and chemistry. He thought, like his father, he would become a medical doctor. But while a student at Trinity University in San Antonio, Doggett says his interests shifted toward economics and business. He graduated in 1988 with a B.A. in economics and a business minor.

Doggett knew he wanted to go to graduate school, but he was torn between studying economics or law. He decided a law degree offered a future with more flexible employment options. “I thought it would open more doors with more opportunities,” he says.

He earned a J.D. cum laude from South Texas College of Law in Houston in December 1991. But he wasn’t done with school. He enjoyed tax law and decided that a master’s degree in tax would give him a competitive edge in the job market. He earned an LL.M. in tax from New York University School of Law in 1993. From there, he joined Matthews and Branscomb in San Antonio, where he became a shareholder in January 2000.

Doggett and his wife of almost seven years, Mary, a property tax partner in the San Antonio office of Linebarger Goggin Blair & Sampson, live in San Antonio.

The Scooter Store hired Doggett because the company became large enough to need an in-house attorney who could understand the daily dynamics of the business, says Fred Stepan, vice president of finance. “The transition from private practice into a corporate environment can be a very difficult situation,” Stepan says. “David was effective in that

he identified, early on, the different role he would play in a corporate environment versus a corporate practice. That involved listening, establishing the right partnerships with people and understanding the priorities of the business and its culture.”

Stepan says he interacts with Doggett daily. “I look at David as a business partner to help drive the business forward.”

Despite the pressures faced by a first-year corporate executive, Doggett’s man-

Doggett’s outside counsel on intellectual property matters. Barnes says the two interact almost every day on IP issues. Doggett is quick-minded, easily able to prioritize issues and doesn’t stress out, Barnes says, adding, “he looks at the bright side of things. He’s very pragmatic. He must be very well-centered. He has a confidence that is not arrogance.”

While at Matthews and Branscomb, Doggett quickly became a highly competent attorney, says Richard Goldsmith, a shareholder in the San Antonio firm

## THE GC SURVEYS FELLOW BAR MEMBERS AND FORMER COLLEAGUES FOR REFERENCES AND ALSO CONTACTS OTHER IN-HOUSE ATTORNEYS FOR ADVICE.

agement style is laid back, says Perez, who spends every Tuesday reviewing contracts at the company’s headquarters. “David will give me a project and say ‘take it and run with it,’” Perez says. “I’ll do it from beginning to end and pull him in when a question comes up that he needs to be involved in.”

Truss, who does labor and employment for the company at its sites on Wednesdays or Fridays, agrees. “He fills me in on what he needs and then lets me do what needs to get done,” Truss says. She worked with Doggett at Matthews and Branscomb from 1997 to 2002 and has been an outside counsel to the company since March. “Through the years, I think I’ve learned good techniques for client relations from him,” she says. “I think a good style with client relations works when you are an internal as well as external [counsel].”

Doggett has an open-door policy and encourages staff interaction, Perez says. “We just walk in each other’s offices and ask questions of each other all the time,” she says.

Doggett is “eminently accessible,” says Brad Barnes, a partner in Loefler Jonas & Tuggey in San Antonio and

and a former colleague whom Doggett considers a mentor. “He carved out his own field of expertise in business tax,” Goldsmith says.

Since joining The Scooter Store, Doggett occasionally calls Goldsmith seeking advice. “And I would be impressed that he had acquired a depth of knowledge in other fields, like securities law and labor law, which were not part of his practice here,” Goldsmith says. “I was extremely sorry to see him leave here, but it was an opportunity that came his way, and he took it.”

Doggett says that opportunity – working with a company that serves the elderly and disabled who have mobility problems – has increased his own commitment to staying in shape. “It’s definitely made me more aware that it is important to create healthy lifestyle habits that will make a difference in later years,” he says. While he enjoys outside activities on the weekends – such as golfing, fishing, bicycling and hiking – Doggett says he also tries to take spinning classes at a health club near the company a couple of times each week during his lunch hour.

Notes Doggett, “I’m definitely more in tune to my own mortality.”