

CLEVELAND EDITION | VOL. 1 NO. 3

ATTORNEY AT LAW

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MAGAZINE®

Diane Citrino

Attorney of the Month

Emerson Thomson Bennett
Law Firm of the Month



the Art of Law

Diane Citrino

By Haley Freeman

Aristotle said, “Law is reason free from passion.” Aristotle was clearly not describing Diane Citrino, as she is a dynamic advocate whose career in the law spans nonprofit, government and private practice. She fuses reason with passion to achieve solutions with lasting and positive resonance, and her commitment to social justice challenges law to be not only just, but fair.

Today, Citrino is a well-recognized attorney at the woman-owned firm of Giffen & Kaminski. Her rich practice history benefits the companies that hire her to investigate matters related to employee conduct, as well as the outside lawyers to whom she acts as special counsel. She is also skilled in Title IX investigations, consulting and training. She litigates an array of employment issues and maintains a national reputation for her fair housing litigation. A well-rounded business litigator, she brings her passion to all that she does.

Citrino and her colleagues share a creative, team atmosphere and “are committed to community involvement. GK is a fabulous place to work, where everyone works together and supports your success,” Citrino said. The firm’s tag line, “Think Practical Results,” is echoed in its unconventional Web address, ThinkGK.com. This is a legal culture where innovation and collaboration are nurtured, and where Citrino’s multifaceted background and experience are

greatly valued by peers and clients.

Citrino earned her law degree from the University of California, Berkeley, before joining a prominent Chicago firm and then going on to a position with the Legal Assistance Foundation of Chicago. While there, she prevailed in her representation of 1,400 Spanish-speaking beauty school students who had been promised but then not given an education in Spanish. Proceeding under civil RICO for the fraudulent use of federal Pell grant funds, Citrino proved early in her career that she is a pioneer of solutions others may not see.

Diane 2.0

The ability to reinvent oneself is a mark of a creative person, and Citrino’s adaptability has been a key element of her success. “One of my nicknames is Diane 2.0,” she said. “I embrace reinvention and change. It is a big leap to go from a big firm to nonprofit, to government, and then to small firm, for-profit work. I think my ability to adjust and be agile has helped me to have a rewarding career solving problems for others.”

Citrino’s belief in community service is evinced in her wide-ranging involvement in the Cleveland community. She has distinguished herself as regional director of the Ohio Civil Rights Commission (OCRC), as a private practitioner, and as a community advocate.

“I love what I do,” Citrino said. “I’m passionate about connecting with a broad

range of people and ideas. Few people have the opportunity to earn their living doing what they love. It gives me purpose to work on issues that have meaning.”

Inspired by the Courage of her Clients

In her fair housing work, Citrino has prevailed in a number of high-profile cases, earning a sterling national reputation. She considers herself “lucky because I have represented people for whom justice was improbable. I have been inspired by the courage of my clients.”

In one such case, Citrino won one of the largest verdicts on record for a group of women who were sexually abused by a landlord. “He tried to rent to people who were vulnerable and desperate for housing and therefore unlikely to complain. The case went on for years, and the stories were gut-wrenching. Many clients had mental disabilities. Many had children and didn’t want to move and change schools. These were people who didn’t know they had fair housing rights. Housing is private and abuses can be more easily hidden from view.”

Citrino explained, “There was a lot of investigative work in the case, including over 50 depositions. We also used an undercover police officer to see how a female applicant was treated.” That experience, combined with the hundreds of cases she oversaw as a regional director of the OCRC, have made her sought after for her ability to investigate under the most difficult of circumstances.



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Nancy Drew Meets Perry Mason

Citrino describes herself as a “Type A, oldest of five” whose childhood heroes were Nancy Drew and Perry Mason. From early days, she saw a future for herself in the justice system.

When she left the OCRC, Citrino was approached by various companies about conducting independent investigations. A Spanish speaker with a diverse practice history, Citrino found a comfortable niche in corporate investigations, where she works with companies to proactively change their cultures. “Companies want a second set of eyes to help figure out what is happening and how to straighten it out.”

Citrino’s approachability helps employees discuss the real facts and issues with her so she can identify potential or existing problems and collaborate with management to craft solutions. “When you’re doing an investigation, you have to be able to relate to people, and they have to be able to talk to you. I love doing investigations because it’s almost like writing a novel. Hearing everyone’s perspective is like a triptych – seeing the same story from three different perspectives. Your job is to put the lens in focus to get those different pieces of the Venn diagram to overlap.”

Citrino’s investigative talents are also much sought-after by colleges and universities seeking assistance with Title IX investigations. “Colleges and universities are experiencing heightened scrutiny in sexual misconduct investigations where an excellent investigation is critical to protecting all involved – alumni, students, professors and the institution itself. Bringing clarity to the situation helps address the problem quickly and effectively. Along with investigations, Giffen & Kaminski attorneys have expertise in counseling schools on improving their Title IX policies and procedures.”

A Feather Quill

The dreams of a little girl who loved watching Perry Mason were fully realized when Citrino represented a client in front of the U.S. Supreme Court. “That was a thrilling experience given that there are thousands of petitions for certiorari, and during that term, the court accepted less than 80 cases.”

Citrino was touched when she received a feather quill at counsel table, a Supreme Court tradition that endures from the early 1800s. “It was an unforgettable experience,” she said, “to be part of that tradition. What the court says matters so much, and so many people are affected by the issues they choose to hear.”

Citrino has received many honors for her outstanding legal achievements, most notably, the Rosa Parks Congressional Medal, awarded to her by the OCRC.

Art Imitates Life

Aristotle is also credited with the saying, “Art imitates life.” Among her many talents, Citrino is an artist who took up pottery making at Berkeley. She is also an avid reader and gardener who sees herself as “creating beauty along with creating justice.”

One of Citrino’s appreciative clients honored her by dedicating a fair housing mural to her entitled, “It Is Above That You and I Shall Go.” It is located on the western wall of the Six Chimneys apartment building in Cleveland’s MidTown district. Another client dedicated his graphic novel, with the inscription, “In honor of Diane E. Citrino; A Gatherer of Diamonds.”

An enthusiast of art and language, Citrino is moved by these unique expressions of gratitude. “My career has taught me how much of an impact one person can have. I feel proud to be a part of the Cleveland community and to have made some small contribution to its social evolution. My clients have changed me for the better. It is a privilege to unite my passion with a purpose, improving my clients’ situations and my community.”



At a Glance

Practice Areas

Business and Employment Litigation
Independent Employment Investigations
Title IX Investigations, Consulting and Training
Fair Housing Enforcement

Education

Juris Doctor, University of California, Berkeley
Bachelor of Arts, Brown University, Phi Beta Kappa

Professional Affiliations

Ohio Advisory Committee to the United States Civil Rights Commission, Chair
ABA Delegate
Federal Bar Association, Civil Rights Section, Chair, 2011-2012
Cleveland Metropolitan Bar Association, Trustee, 2006-2011

Select Honors

Rosa Parks Congressional Medal
One of 10 Ohio Lawyers of the Year, Ohio Lawyers Weekly
Housing Research & Advocacy Award
Year 2000 OCRC Leadership Award

Favorite Quote

“Where justice is denied, where poverty is enforced, where ignorance prevails, and where any one class is made to feel that society is an organized conspiracy to oppress, rob and degrade them, neither persons nor property will be safe.”

– Frederick Douglass

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