Safeguarding Secrets
A worldly Madison lawyer rides the growing concern for intellectual property

By Kathryn Kingsbury

In nearly two decades of practicing law, Gina Carter has seen significant changes in the obstacles faced by people who want to protect their intellectual property -- and she's not only talking about the Internet. "Certainly, the digital revolution has made it a challenge for copyright owners to protect their property," says Carter, a nationally known litigator who became head of the intellectual property team for the Whyte Hirschboeck Dudek law firm in Madison last January.

But she emphasizes that creators face other dilemmas, as well. The variation in patent and copyright laws in different countries, for example, poses difficulties for the growing number of businesses that work across borders. And, as professionals increasingly move from company to company throughout their careers, employers must take special care to guard their trade secrets from competitors.

"The demand for lawyers has increased since I started in the area," Carter says. She has worked with just about every type of client imaginable, from major technology companies to small advertising agencies to musicians. "I've had cases from something as mundane as a steam table pan to the genetics of corn," she says.

A Midwesterner by choice -- she grew up in the northeast and earned her undergraduate and law degrees at Georgetown University in Washington, D.C. -- Carter says she occasionally has to contend with coastal colleagues who wonder, "There's intellectual property to protect in Wisconsin? I thought all they had there was cheese."

A brief mention of cutting-edge biotech research and the University of Wisconsin is all it takes to clear up misperceptions of our state as an intellectual backwater. Besides, she points out, even cheesemakers have their trade secrets.

Trilingual in Spanish, English and modern Greek, Carter doesn't shy away from the unconventional if it will make her a better lawyer. In the 1990s, while with LaFollette Sinykin (now LaFollette, Godfrey and Kahn), she telecommuted from South Africa for eight months while guest lecturing at a law school there. When her second child was born, she spent her seven months of family leave in Chile, where she further expanded her knowledge of the way intellectual property law works across borders.

But Madison is Carter's true home. "For an intellectual property lawyer, it's never dull," she says. "I'm blessed to be in a community of inventors. It's exciting to start out with an entrepreneur who just has an idea and see it through to commercial implementation."

Kathryn Kingsbury is a contributing writer for Madison Magazine.

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