

Upstart Law Firm Lands Seasoned Litigator's Co-Counsel From 'Pink Slime' Trial

Benesch has hired a pair of Winston & Strawn partners looking to build their own reputations at a growing firm.

By **Roy Strom** | October 03, 2018 at 03:20 PM



A worker sorts cuts of beef that are used in the manufacturing process of lean, finely textured beef, also known as “pink slime,” at a Beef Products Inc. plant in South Sioux City, Nebraska, on March 29, 2012. (Photo: Nati Harnik/AP)

J. Erik Connolly and Nicole Wrigley have worked with one of the country's best-known trial lawyers: [Winston & Strawn](#) co-executive chairman Dan Webb.

Now, they will be working to make their new firm an elite brand in big-ticket litigation.

The duo, who served as Webb's deputies in a widely covered defamation trial last year involving a meat product derisively referred to as "pink slime," recently joined [Benesch, Friedlander, Coplan & Aronoff](#), a nearly 200-lawyer Midwest regional firm that now boasts of having 41 lawyers in Chicago after having [only launched in the city three years ago](#) with two partners.

Connolly and Wrigley are stepping out on their own and headed to a firm that has [grown rapidly in recent years](#), moving to No. 180 on the [Am Law Second Hundred](#) after making its debut on the list a year prior at a [ranking 15 spots lower](#). Benesch has brought on nearly 60 lawyers nationally during the past 18 months, although the firm did [close an office in Indianapolis](#) following a [raid from regional rival Taft Stettinius & Hollister](#).



J. Erik Connolly

“Telling Dan [Webb] that we were leaving was one of the more difficult conversations that I’ve had professionally,” Connolly said. “We have nothing but respect for Dan. But Dan has also told us, and we agree, that when the right opportunity presents itself and you can strike out on the right opportunity, you have to take it.”

Growth is good, but reputations like Webb’s can take a lifetime to develop. Connolly and Wrigley said they believed their practice could thrive with Benesch’s Midwest rate structure in a legal market where clients are facing pressure to lower their legal spending.

The bulk of Benesch’s more than 200 lawyers reside in Cleveland and Columbus, Ohio. The firm has a two-lawyer outpost in New York; a lawyer in Shanghai; and a two-lawyer team in Philadelphia. Its Chicago office, which recently signed a lease for 62,000 square feet of space that it will move into next summer, has enough room for 90 lawyers.

Benesch had \$75 million in gross revenue in 2014, according to *The American Lawyer*. That was the year before a [concerted expansion effort began](#) under current managing partner Gregg Eisenberg. By 2017, Benesch’s gross revenue had grown to just over \$118 million.

“This is a real opportunity for us and for the firm to go after and win some of the larger nine-figure cases that Nicole and I have been litigating our whole careers,” Connolly said. “And we are able to go to clients and say, ‘Hire us because we have a track record and a very successful one in handling these cases, and we have the flexibility that you’ll get a good return on your legal spend.’”

A Winston & Strawn spokeswoman did not return a request for comment from the firm and Webb, [who serves as its co-executive chairman](#), about the departures of Connolly and Wrigley. Webb, however, [has credited the pair](#) with handling the bulk of the pretrial litigation and taking the lead in trial preparation for the suit against ABC News and its parent company The Walt Disney Corp. on behalf of South Dakota-based Beef Products Inc., which saw its business slashed by more than half following news reports in 2012 that branded its finely textured lean beef product as “pink slime.”

Winston & Strawn took the case on a contingent fee basis and used [portions of the settlement with Disney and Walt Disney to fuel its own lateral hiring spree](#) over the past year. While the size of the settlement has not been made public, Disney stated in securities filings that it paid \$177 million above its insurance coverage to resolve the litigation.



Nicole Wrigley

The suit settled last year after 17 days of trial in which Webb, Connolly, Wrigley and other Winston & Strawn litigators presented their client’s side of the case. Webb has said the settlement on behalf of Beef Products was the largest in U.S. history for a defamation claim.

Connolly and Wrigley said they would look for cases to take on a contingent basis at Benesch, which under Eisenberg’s leadership has [sought to improve its processes](#), and both lawyers are already working on a contingent fee case already underway at their new firm.

“This great opportunity came up at the right time of our career to make a pivot,” said Wrigley, who is not related to the well-known [Chicago confectionary tycoon of the same name](#). “It became one of those things where we just didn’t want to pass it up. It was so attractive to us to want to grow a practice.”

Wrigley and Connolly join a Benesch office in Chicago office that just watched employee benefits partner Jessica Winski, [who joined the firm earlier this year from Vedder Price](#), decamp for an in-house role at insurance giant Allstate Corp. Benesch did recruit two new associates—[Justin Dykstra and Lally Gartel](#)—in early September for its Windy City base.