Panhandle Pedigree
Jeanne Graham

Geoffrey Kolander envisioned himself as a hometown lawyer when he took a job with an Amarillo-based law firm after graduating in 2001 from the University of Houston Law Center. He was the son and grandson of Panhandle lawyers and recalls re-reading To Kill A Mockingbird during his last year in law school.

"I wanted to head back up there and really integrate myself in the community and be a hometown lawyer," he says.

Twelve years later he is the executive vice president, general counsel and secretary of Citizens Inc. a publicly traded insurance holding company. The Austin-based company has more than 600 employees and reported more than $200 million in 2012 revenues. It's a public company but is controlled by a family member who can select the majority of the company's board of directors, Kolander says.

For the past five years, Kolander has been meeting twice annually with a group of about 30 GCs of family-controlled public companies to talk about legal issues specific to their unique corporate structures. The group includes the GCs of Dillard's Inc., The New York Times Co., and Estée Lauder Cos. Inc.

"I started out my legal career with an Atticus Finch plan, heading to the Panhandle with aspirations to be a judge," Kolander says. "All of a sudden I'm doing corporate securities law with a New York license and a Colorado license, doing really sophisticated work and interacting with the sophisticated GCs of these companies." But Kolander says he has not forgotten his roots. "I'm still just a Panhandle Texas kid, going 'man is this cool,' " he says. "The day I don't think that it's cool, I will check myself and make sure my head is in the right place, because maybe it will be too big."

Kolander always wanted to be a lawyer. While earning a bachelor's degree in business administration at Texas A&M University, he took electives geared toward law school such as government and constitutional law.

"There was no doubt in my mind that my calling was in the legal direction," he says. His father, Jerry Kolander Jr., is the managing partner of McCleskey, Harriger, Brazill & Graf in Lubbock. His grandfather, Jerry Kolander Sr., now deceased, was a county court of law judge and in private practice in Amarillo.
Despite the family history, Kolander says, "There was never an ounce of pressure on me to consider this profession." But Kolander says he grew up knowing his father loved his work.

"I could see the satisfaction he took in solving people's issues and problems," he says.

Kolander decided to begin his legal career in Amarillo with Underwood, Wilson, Berry, Stein & Johnson (now The Underwood Law Firm). He was a generalist associate handling matters including corporate and business transactions, non-profit governance, intellectual property and litigation. After almost four years with the firm he became the general counsel for one of his clients, Tejas Industries Ltd./Merrick Pet Care Ltd. in Amarillo. The family-owned company had more than 800 employees and owned the largest manufacturing plant in the Panhandle, he says.

"The Merrick family brought me in as the first GC," Kolander says. "That's when the learning really took off."

He says that company fonder Garth Merrick and his son, Tyler Merrick, taught him that humility was putting others' interests ahead of one self and not worrying about who received credit for successes.

"They really engrained that value in me," he says.

In 2006, he learned through a friend of his wife's family, that an Austin-based public company was looking for a GC. The lure of working for a publicly-traded company was strong, plus his wife, Amber, was from the Austin area. He says it was a great time to become the GC of a public company with the compliance issues related to the Sarbanes-Oxley Act of 2002.

"I had the opportunity to really jump into that area of law," he says.

Kolander says his 2013 salary is $315,000 and his in-house department includes an associate general counsel and a legal assistant.

The legal department handles shareholder relations and matters such as mergers and acquisitions, employment law, contracts and real estate. He uses outside counsel, for litigation and securities matters, such as Peter Kolevzon, a corporate and securities counsel with Kramer Levin Naftalis & Frankel in New York City.

"Geoff understands that not everybody knows everything," Kolevzon says. "He is very attentive to important issues and finding problems and solving them to get the job done."
For litigation matters, Kolander says he uses lawyers such as Locke Lord's Roger Cowie, a partner in the firm's Dallas office.

"I get the impression he is always, not just looking for people to just do stuff, but also people to help him learn stuff from outside his areas of expertise," Cowie says. He says that Kolander has earned the respect of the senior management at Citizens Inc.

"So I think they view him as more than a lawyer, but also as a leader of the company."

Kolander, who lives in Austin with his wife and their four children, recalls his father telling him when he was about 14 years old that the best lawyers don't know all the answers, they just know how to find the answers to solve problems.

"I have taken that and built a practice around that mentality," Kolander says. "In the corporate world, you cannot succeed as a GC if you're a know-it-all. Nobody wants that. Heck, I don't know all the answers, but come to me and we'll find the right answers."