

Julie Myers Wood: From Whitewater To White House To CEO

By **Sue Reisinger**

Law360 (March 17, 2021, 1:31 PM EDT) -- The legal career of Julie Myers Wood has traveled from Whitewater to White House and now to CEO of a major consulting firm that advises in legal areas as diverse as her varied background.

For the past six years, Wood has been CEO of Guidepost Solutions in Washington, D.C., Her company provides compliance, ethics and integrity monitoring, along with investigative and security services.

When she talks of people who have guided her, the list is a who's-who of legal stars: former solicitor general and independent counsel Ken Starr, former federal judge and former Homeland Security Secretary Michael Chertoff, former U.S. Attorney General Loretta Lynch, and Bart Schwartz, founder of Guidepost Solutions and former criminal division chief in the U.S. attorney's office in Manhattan.



Julie Myers Wood

She spoke with Law360 recently about her professional journey and what she learned, and is still learning, along the way. Her remarks were edited for clarity and brevity.

Let's start at the beginning. Why did you choose the law?

I had wanted to be a lawyer and prosecutor since grade school. It frustrated my dad, who disliked lawyers with all his might. Arguing was a natural skill for me. I loved debate, and I thought issues in government and the law were interesting.

I went to law school at Cornell, and then clerked for Judge Arlen Beam in the U.S. Eighth Circuit Court of Appeals in Nebraska. Then I joined what is now Mayer Brown in Chicago and worked on some high-stakes cases there, including defending the Democratic National Committee over free speech challenges on Navy Pier during the time of the 1996 presidential convention in Chicago.

I was interviewing my first witness, and the courtroom artist started sketching me. A colleague said, "Remember this day because it will never get any better than this." That actually cemented in my mind that I would take any interesting opportunity that came my way, because I didn't want to be 65 years old one day and still thinking the highlight of my career was this matter I worked on as a 25-year-old.

So what was that next interesting opportunity?

I went to work for Ken Starr in the independent counsel's office in Little Rock and in Washington. We were investigating President Bill Clinton's Whitewater financial dealings. They needed a junior associate on a brief for bankruptcy fraud. Two weeks later [the] Monica Lewinsky [scandal] happened and I went to work on that [Lewinsky's sexual allegations against Clinton].

I was the only woman on the team at first and the most junior, working with senior prosecutors. One of my roles during Lewinsky's debriefings was to escort her to the bathroom; that's how junior I was.

What significant lesson did you learn from that experience?

I learned that sometimes as a prosecutor you don't want to take advantage of every tool you have. There can be a lot of benefits in showing restraint. I learned that lesson by what went right and what went wrong. I still have tremendous respect for Judge Starr. He has been a mentor, and we have stayed in touch over the years.

From there, how did you become an assistant U.S. attorney?

I'd been trying for years to get into the U.S. attorney's office as a prosecutor. Coming from Ken Starr's office during the Clinton administration was not an easy task. But this girl from Kansas finally ended up in Brooklyn, where I had never been before, and I knew no one. Then-U.S. Attorney Loretta Lynch and Andrew Weissman [then the office's criminal division chief] were willing to take a chance on me.

I stayed a little over two years. I had planned to stay there for my career, even bought a place there, but after 9/11, my view changed about what I might do. I really wanted to [go to Washington and] get in on the fight. I wanted to see if I could do more to protect national security.

During the Bush administration, I got an interview with the U.S. Treasury Department and was hired as deputy assistant secretary regarding money laundering and related crimes. It was immensely fulfilling. But it was frustrating because they were already talking about splitting off the parts of Treasury where I was working to start a new Department of Homeland Security.

So Michael Chertoff, who was then U.S. assistant attorney general in charge of the Criminal Division, asked me to be his chief of staff in Main Justice. I was only there about a year because he left to become a federal appeals court judge, but working for him was one of the best things that happened in my life.

Why do you say that?

Because he is a brilliant lawyer, with the ability to think surgically about problems. He taught me a way to think and to build tighter arguments that would be persuasive in a federal bureaucracy. He's so good at seeing the future, spotting problems that might arise. He also remains a mentor and a friend.

What came next?

Chertoff recommended me for assistant secretary for export enforcement at the Department of Commerce. It was my first Senate-confirmed role. I ran a law enforcement agency of about 200 agents and analysts with offices around the world. I learned a ton about running a small enforcement agency and about trade compliance.

I observed the trade negotiations going on with India and with China, and how the agency's enforcing regulations can have a broad effect on negotiations.

You were only there about a year. What happened?

I got a call to meet with Dina Powell [now Dina Powell McCormick], the head of the White House personnel office. She asked if, after President Bush was re-elected, I would come help her find good candidates for cabinet secretaries and assistant secretaries.

I didn't want to do it. It was special assistant to the president, but, I mean it was a personnel job. It was made pretty clear to me, though, that this was an opportunity that I should wisely not turn down. So I agreed, on the condition I was just to help on the second-term nominees, and then I could move into another position.

Where did you go next?

I became assistant secretary for Immigration and Customs Enforcement in the Department of Homeland Security. It was tremendous to run an agency of almost 15,000 employees, enforcing more than 500 laws, some quite controversial.

It was tremendously challenging — all while being pregnant with my first child.

Wait? When did you find time to fall in love, get married and get pregnant?

I love that question! John [Wood, now the general counsel of the U.S. Chamber of Commerce] and I were set up on a blind date when I was at the Department of Commerce and he was at Main Justice [as deputy associate attorney general, and then counselor to the attorney general].

John and I are both from the Midwest; he's from St. Louis, and I'm from Kansas City, and it clicked right away. John has been the most supportive husband throughout my career. He's encouraged me to take risks, kept the house running smoothly when I was stuck on the road for days at a time, and always provided me with the best advice.

Okay, back to the big challenges at ICE. What important lessons did you learn in that job?

I learned about the broad challenges that keep immigration reform from being passed, and about the difficulties in moving agencies forward when customs and INS [the legacy Immigration and Naturalization Service] didn't want to be together. It was a shotgun marriage.

The most important thing I learned there, though, was the importance of hiring really good, talented people and relying on them. The issues were just too complicated and too novel for anyone to handle on their own.

One thing I saw very clearly at ICE was that many companies were not compliant on immigration or trade regulations because they didn't have the tools or the right information. So I decided to launch my own firm to focus on that. By then the Bush administration was ending, I was a political appointee, and it was time to move on.

So you launched a compliance consulting firm?

Well, my chief of staff and I developed three software products for companies to use as tools. To help pay for product development, we did compliance consulting on the side. But timing is everything. The software sales were okay, but the compliance work just kept growing.

Then Guidepost Solutions and Bart Schwartz sought to buy my firm. I said no. But a year later they came back and said we really want you and your firm. After a lot of negotiation, I said yes.

It's been a tremendous opportunity. I just ran the D.C. office with a couple of people at first, and in a couple of years I became CEO, where I've been for six years as the company has grown and thrived.

You have a background in so many areas; tell me what sort of work you do at Guidepost.

Besides compliance and security consulting, we do monitorships; serve as divestiture trustees in antitrust cases; conduct large investigations; help design security systems; advise on sanctions, trade, immigration, financial crimes, CFIUS rules [the Committee on Foreign Investment in the United States], and in general help companies navigate challenges.

I served as an antitrust monitoring trustee for the CVS and Aetna merger, and in the Raytheon Corp.-United Technologies Corp. merger. I also served as a monitor for several European financial institutions, which is not a public record. We're helping the University of Michigan build a compliance culture after sexual harassment issues there.

Do you work mostly for companies?

For companies, the government, educational institutions, and one of our biggest clients is law firms who bring us in to help. The quality of the people we bring makes us unique — best in class from the FBI, the DEA, other agencies. We are able to provide lower cost services when they need subject matter experts.

Who are your major competitors?

The Big Four accounting firms, and other consulting firms like FTI and Navigant.

What part of the job do you like most?

The business strategy side, which is consuming more and more of my time as the company grows. Last year we targeted growth in seven areas. We have acquired a Miami and Bogota-based investigative firm.

The management side of it is learning where to pivot. We are pivoting around data, for example, managing data and all the new rules around it.

What's your key business growth area for the future?

I personally am spending lot of time in the crypto and fintech world. It is a steadily growing area. The regulations are changing, and we need to make sure we are up to date.

We've done some investments, including into a cyber firm, as well as in other areas where we think there will be high demand. We are providing Guidepost with partnerships in those areas.

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