

Interview with an Indiana Leader: **Melissa Proffitt**



The Indianapolis chapter of Conscious Capitalism welcomes lawyer and local leader Melissa Proffitt to share her views on Conscious Leadership.

Melissa is an attorney with Ice Miller LLC. She is Partner-in-Charge of Client Relations, former Managing Partner of the firm and former Office Managing Partner of the firm, chairs the Food & Agribusiness Group and the Energy Group, and is former Chair of the Employee Benefits Group. Melissa is responsible for business development initiatives for the firm. She concentrates her practice in employee benefits with a focus on welfare benefit plans and qualified plans. She counsels regional and international clients on benefit issues, including plan formation and design.

Throughout her career, Melissa has devoted herself to economic and social improvements in Indiana. In November 2024, the Indianapolis Business Journal named her the 31st recipient of the Michael A. Carroll Award, given annually to a man or woman who has demonstrated the former deputy mayor's qualities of determination, humility and service. Carroll was among six people killed when two small planes collided over southern Marion County on Sept. 11, 1992.

Conscious Capitalism Indianapolis extends its thanks to Melissa for sharing her views and beliefs about having a conscious approach to business in Indiana.

Q&A with Melissa Proffitt

2024 RECIPIENT OF IBJ'S MICHAEL A. CARROLL AWARD

Throughout your career, you've demonstrated a commitment to Conscious Leadership through your work both within and beyond the law firm, contributing to initiatives that have made significant improvements for our community. Where does this leadership approach come from? Was there a leader or mentor who influenced you in your early career?

This leadership approach developed from watching many other individuals throughout my life who have influenced me. Many different individuals have inspired me along the way.

Both professionally and at home, I was always encouraged to pursue community service. My first and greatest personal influence was my father, who was also a lawyer and very involved in the community, both civically and politically. He made giving back to the community a natural instinct for me.

Also, I am an avid learner and love being around people. That is probably what has drawn me to so many different causes and kept me interested in learning about important causes that drive others. I was offered, very early in my career, an opportunity to engage civically. I viewed it as an honor to be offered those opportunities by senior partners and always took advantage of them. I never regretted accepting an offer to serve, and I still rarely say no. When it comes down to it, I always receive more than I give by being engaged in philanthropy and our community. Because I was so positively influenced by watching others, I feel that it is incredibly important to give back.

Finally, I am very action-oriented and like to see specific goals achieved. Thus, I hope to inspire others who also enjoy solving problems. There's nothing more rewarding than working with a group of people that you greatly respect who come together to better our community.

Beyond your service for clients of Ice Miller, your donations of time and expertise to various community-centric initiatives (e.g., WNBA All Star 2025 Host Committee) have led to win-win-win outcomes for stakeholders in our city and state. Is there an extracurricular involvement of which you're most proud or that stands out in your mind for its significant impact?

I have been involved in numerous community-centric initiatives throughout my career. Some of my interests have been motivated by my work at my firm, some are purely personal, and some are focused on specific issues. Generally, the areas of greatest interest to me tend to be focused on economic development. For example, I worked with numerous political administrations from Governor Daniels to Governor Holcomb and have traveled on over 17 different international trade missions with the goal to inspire companies to locate in Indiana, or to grow their current businesses. I have also been involved, for decades, in the Indy Chamber and the Indiana Chamber and their economic development initiatives. Another area of important focus for me is my alma mater, Indiana University. I want to make Indianapolis and our state stronger and better.

One particular experience that stands out in my mind, for which I am proud was fostering relationships that occurred while serving on the Transition Team for Mayor Ballard. It was challenging to learn about city government, what positions needed to be filled, and to understand the needs of the various roles for the administration, and then try to connect individuals to those positions. This all had to be done within a three-month time period, trying to convince individuals to leave good paying jobs that they were happy with for less than half their pay, to serve our City of Indianapolis, with a Mayor they did not know. Countless amazing leaders became a part of that administration. It was rewarding, and continues to be rewarding to watch these individuals lead our City in such an impactful way, and then go on to serve in the private sector furthering their impact.

Another example is the creation of the Public Safety Foundation. When I served on Mayor Ballard's Transition Team and we were interviewing for the head of Public Safety. I interviewed Troy Riggs, who subsequently served in the role of Public Safety Director. While interviewing him, he talked about a foundation that he had started in Corpus Cristi, Texas, which provided in-kind services to first responders, including police, fire, and EMS. The Foundation was a way to tap into the business community, and use their resources, expertise and talent to help our first responders. I told him if we hired him, that I would start such a foundation in Indianapolis. We hired Troy, and we started the Public Safety Foundation. When we set up our first board – with over 20 members – not one person turned us down. It was an incredibly powerful board, including Senator Lugar, former CEO Dayton Molendorf, Jim Morris, John Neighbors and others. The organization now has 45 employees and a \$5 million budget, and it came from an idea as a result of a conversation during an interview.

It is also very rewarding to me to serve on any board, particularly in a leadership role. Most recently, I was Board Chair for the Indy Chamber, and chaired the Search Committee responsible for hiring their new President and CEO, Matt Mindrum. I currently serve as the Chair of the Indiana Chamber and work with their new President and CEO Vanessa Green Sinderson.

You've spent your career to date working with Ice Miller, where you serve as a partner and presumably an influencer of workplace culture. What behaviors or beliefs do you model in the workplace to ensure a Conscious Culture for everyone?

I think there are many behaviors and beliefs that are important to ensure a healthy work environment and culture for individuals. Hard work is never to be understated. Everyone should pull their weight and work hard to better themselves and their organization. Honesty and integrity are two fundamental pillars. You need to be honest and show the highest of ethics and integrity with clients, as well as your colleagues. It is important to be somewhat of a dreamer and believer in the future, and always be willing to accept change.

One thing I've learned over my many years of practicing law is that nothing remains the same, especially the law. Thus, the way a person approaches his or her business is constantly evolving and changing. One needs to embrace this change. In addition, the workforce is composed of many different generations. One needs to adapt to and appreciate the differences of thoughts and approach. In the long run, it is so clear how fundamentally important a strong leader is to an organization. If you have a strong leader that believes in the mission of the organization and in the talents and capabilities of the people helping to lead that mission, you can be unstoppable.

Through Conscious Capitalism, we espouse the belief that business should exist for a Higher Purpose – beyond the pursuit of profits – to elevate humanity and make positive change. How would you describe your Higher Purpose or the driving force behind your work?

I love my community and state. Not only do I want to be an outstanding lawyer, but I want to make positive change within my community. I want to make our state a place that our children, friends and family want to live.

In the beginning, I was motivated by my father – I watched his active engagement in politics and the community and I admired him for it, and saw all the friends he made along the way. I was also motivated by Ice Miller – from our founder Harry Ice to the senior partners I worked for – it was expected that we would contribute to our community. Having watched those before me, I truly believe civic engagement is imperative to ensure our state's success, our families' happiness, and our own personal well-being.

So, if our state's success or giving back to your community is not top of mind, or it seems a little nebulous (can I really make a difference?), please know that it's one of the most rewarding things you can do for yourself as well as others. We all have a finite amount of time, lots of responsibilities (families, careers), and lots of hardships to address. And we only have so many "sands in the hourglass." But we all are capable of doing so much more. Of giving back – because – and I believe others will agree – you will receive so much more than you give.