

LOSING LABELS, REACHING POTENTIAL

Northwestern Mutual's Ray Manista knows how to shift course in order to grow.

BY ALAN J. BORSUK

Labels can be empowering, Ray Manista says. They also can be limiting. Sometimes people apply labels to you. Sometimes you apply them to yourself.

Some labels have fit Manista well throughout his career. *Principled. Hard working. Good at whatever job he's had. A family man. Community minded. A sports fan.*

But two times when Manista changed labels—largely ones he had put on himself—tell you a lot about his career and character.

Manista graduated from Marquette Law School in 1990. Eight years later, he was a partner in a respected Milwaukee law firm. *Partner* was an attractive label, a career goal for Manista. But he changed it, joining Northwestern Mutual, the large financial services company based in Milwaukee.

At Northwestern Mutual, Manista did well as a corporate attorney. But three years into work as a litigator, he was offered a chance to get involved in broader corporate issues. He took it.

New label, new success. Today, Manista is part of the company's senior leadership team. He carries several titles: executive vice president – chief legal officer, chief compliance officer, and secretary of the corporation. He plays an important role in strategic decisions as Northwestern Mutual changes core aspects of its business to respond to what customers need and want. He was recently given the additional duty of accountability for the company's foundation and philanthropy.

"To be truly effective, I had to lose the labels," Manista says. "The way I see myself and what I can do has changed a lot over the years. The labels thing has been a powerful learning experience for me. Lose the labels and then explore to see what your full potential is."

The Road to Marquette

Manista grew up in a small town in northwestern Indiana, not far from Gary and Valparaiso. His parents, he says, were very generous people. "I'm an adopted kid," he says, and so is his sister. And his parents often brought foster children into the home. Manista says he used to think he wasn't really exposed to diversity until he came to Marquette University, but, looking back, he was involved in a fair amount of it as a youngster.

His parents were high school graduates who worked in the steel mills in the 1950s. Where Manista grew up, he says, you were either a steel worker or a farmer.

He went to Boone Grove High School, a small school southwest of Valparaiso. As he was nearing graduation, he started dating a girl three years younger than he—young enough that she says she needed permission from her parents to start dating. But they liked Ray. (OK, skip ahead: Things worked out well. Ray and Dawne Manista have been married for more than 30 years.)

Manista wanted to become the first in his family to go to college. Something in Chicago sounded like a good idea, but a history teacher at his high school suggested he check out Marquette. He and his father came to Milwaukee.

"I was sold on that first day," he says. He liked the combination of a smaller university community in an urban setting. And, he admits, he liked it that when they pulled up behind Gesu Church on their arrival on a Saturday morning, beer trucks were parked all around, setting up for an event known then as The Block Party.

"I had a wonderful experience at Marquette" as an undergrad, Manista recalls. His class choices focused on political science and urban affairs, and he was learning a lot



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Ray Manista

Ray Manista calls his law school years “quite formative.” He says, “These were professors who were really concerned about helping you realize your full potential and pushing you to become your best.”

“There was expectation, expectation that you be there, that you be there and be prepared, that you be there and be prepared and be willing to stand up [in front of] others I think that that discipline, and the bent toward not just learning the substance of the law but the practical application, were distinguishing things that served me well.”

Upon graduating from law school in

1990, Manista joined the Milwaukee firm of Godfrey & Kahn as a litigator. He was, among other things, a hard worker. Dawne Manista recalls a year in which he worked at least part of every day except nine. He loved the work, he loved the firm—“to this day, I think the world of it”—and he made partner.

The Road to Northwestern Mutual

But then “I decided to leave Godfrey & Kahn, which in many ways, makes no sense,” Manista says. “I saw it actually wasn’t all that I wanted.” Dawne Manista said family concerns were a factor. Ray wanted to be more involved with Dawne and their children.

Ray had a couple of friends who had moved from private practice to Northwestern Mutual. At first, he didn’t take them up on the suggestion that he look into working there. Then he decided to consider it.

of new things. A big plus was that students had a lot of access to professors.

Dawne (Radice) Manista wanted to become a physical therapist, and Marquette offered a very good program. Plus, by the time she was choosing a college, the relationship between Dawne and Ray had gotten deeper. “I felt we grew up together,” says Dawne. So Marquette it was. She would become a physical therapist and worked in the field, full-time and part-time, for many years.

When Ray got his bachelor’s degree and wanted to go to law school, another decision had to be made. Ray and Dawne were on their way to getting married and wanted to have a family, so the city they would be in, as well as the law school, was a factor. They considered several options in the Midwest. But they liked Milwaukee, and they liked Marquette. Decision made. They got married while Ray was in law school.

“Seven meetings later, I accepted the job,” Manista recalls. “It seemed like the hardest decision I ever had to make. Rolling forward: It should have been the easiest decision I ever had to make. . . . This is an incredible place.”

Manista came to Northwestern Mutual as an assistant general counsel and a commercial litigator. But, as he recounts that period, he returns to his thoughts on how people are labeled and label themselves.

“When you went to family parties, you were the lawyer. What did you read? The law. Whom did you interact with? Lawyers. That was in many respects the way that people labeled you, and it was my own sense of self in many ways. It was something I was very proud of, and something that one should be proud of.”

But he had broader interests as well. “Three years in [at Northwestern Mutual], I had an opportunity to go try something different, outside of law. It was a very difficult mental hurdle to get over, because it was corporate strategy. It had to do with strategic planning and corporate market research and things like balanced scorecards and technology implementation. . . .

“I had to get over my own sense of who I was and what I was capable of. In many ways, law firms put you into teams and into categories. You are a bankruptcy lawyer, you’re an ERISA lawyer—go market that. I was a commercial litigator; that’s what I did.

“But now I had the opportunity to do something very different. I made the transition, I learned that many of the things you learned in law school about solving problems, about making lemonade out of lemons as a litigator, those things apply in business, those skills apply on the business side.

“And I learned that to be truly effective, I really needed to lose the labels that were either placed on me or that I placed on myself in terms of my own capability. . . . A smart person put in the right context with the right kind of effort can do a lot of good things.”

The Road to Top Ranks

Manista did a lot of good things, as his rise within Northwestern Mutual demonstrates. He climbed through several positions on the business side, developing himself as a leader in corporate planning and in specific areas such as helping oversee implementation of rapidly changing technology within the company.

In 2008, he was asked to be general counsel of the corporation, succeeding Robert J. Berdan, L’75. He had some reluctance because he liked working on the business side. But it was a flattering offer, and he was assured by firm leaders that they wanted a business-minded general counsel. “I would never have had that opportunity if I had not broken from the label and gone out into the business in the first place,” he observes.

Manista was general counsel for more than nine years, even as he added several other titles. He now is the company’s chief legal officer, which means that he oversees all of the company’s legal, government relations, and compliance operations, involving more than 250 professionals.

Throughout his career, Manista says, his strengths have included bringing people together, helping them make common cause as a team, and encouraging others to grow in their careers—just as he was encouraged as a young lawyer by others. Summing up what he does, Manista says, “My role has always been to connect dots.” He adds, “What motivates me more than ever . . . is the opportunity to help make sense of change, to bring people in the company forward”

Manista has become increasingly involved in seeing that the dots come in lots of different colors, shapes, and sizes and with lots of different qualities. He is a strong advocate for increasing diversity of all kinds in the workforce, both within Northwestern Mutual and beyond. He said Marquette helped move him “out of the little shell I had lived in.” His Marquette years included volunteering at the House of Peace and at St. Leo’s Catholic School, both places near the Marquette campus serving many low-income people.

Now, he says, diversity is not a matter only of helping low-income people. Diversity is important to corporations that need to attract talent, need to connect with diverse populations, and need to benefit from involvement of people with different points of view.

Manista says white business executives should be allies of building diversity, and he’s worked on that himself as a convener and participant in workforce and leadership development. This includes involvement with African-American and Hispanic groups, women’s groups, and groups advocating for gay and lesbian people.

Northwestern Mutual has tremendous opportunity to attract diverse talent, he says, and it’s right and necessary to do so. With pride, he shows a photo of nine Northwestern Mutual vice presidents, all women and all originally or currently members of the legal department.

“I feel I have been blessed to be able to have the opportunity to do new things,” Manista says. “I think of myself as a business leader first and a lawyer second, and that’s on purpose.”

Taking a 360-Degree Perspective

Michael G. Carter, executive vice president and chief financial and risk officer of Northwestern Mutual, describes Manista as someone who is good at focusing on what is important. “He really learns and understands the details; he’s really good at looking at an issue from a 360-degree perspective,” Carter says. Carter, himself a lawyer, says Manista still has the title as chief legal officer and is respected for his skills as a lawyer, “but he’s viewed here as much more than a lawyer.”



Ray and Dawne Manista

And to view Manista as a whole, you certainly also need to view him as a family person. Not only at home, but in church, at cultural events and sports events, or in many other ways, he and Dawne are involved in much together, often oriented toward their children or friends. Their oldest child, Tyler, 26, works in accounting in Boston. Sydney, 23, is an engineer in the same city. And Jarred, 18, is in musical theater.

Ray Manista says Jarred's path offers an additional lesson in empowering people to pursue their dreams and potential. Tyler and Sydney, the two older children, largely have followed paths Ray calls "linear"—high school, college, career, and so on.

Things are shaping up differently for Jarred. Ray says Jarred "came out of the womb dancing." He has been in love with dance and theater his whole life—and there's evidence that he's good at it. Jarred left Dominican High School in the Milwaukee suburb of Whitefish Bay a few weeks earlier than scheduled (yes, he graduated) to join a production of "West Side Story" by the Lyric Opera of Chicago during the summer of 2019. And he is deferring the start of college because he has joined the cast of a different production of "West Side Story" as the play returns to Broadway this fall.

It's Jarred's dream; it's the label Jarred wants for himself now. "I'm OK with it," Ray says. "I think it's going to be an interesting run."

In large part due to Jarred's interest, Ray and Dawne have become involved in the arts and theater community in

Milwaukee and beyond. Education is also a big interest. Ray is a longtime member of the Marquette Law School Advisory Board. He became a member of the Marquette University Board of Trustees in 2017. And he has served on the board of the Milwaukee College Prep charter school network.

And the Manistas are strongly committed Marquette basketball fans. Very strongly. Well, Dawne says, maybe they've eased up a bit in recent years—they try not to take wins and losses quite as emotionally these days. But it's still a huge interest. "We've had fun," Dawne says of being so involved as fans.

Northwestern Mutual's Carter says, "Ray is like a Marquette University billboard, just the way he leads his life—family, faith, parish, both he and his wife. And he loves Marquette." Carter, not a Marquette alumnus, adds, "If you look at what Marquette is all about and you look at how he turned out, I think that's a tribute to the university."

The world is changing quickly. The business world is changing. What is required of good lawyers in a business setting is changing. The technology of it all, the speed of it all, the things people are seeking in their personal and professional lives—they're all changing.

The work world around Ray Manista is, as he puts it, a totally emerging space. "Transformation is afoot," he says.

Yet, even as he changes, Manista is consistent in important respects: He's deeply involved in the transformation, and he's doing all he can to make the change good for all. ■