When James Kelly ’83 was admitted to Fordham University Law School, he was working full time as a paralegal at Patterson Belknap, a high-profile law firm in midtown Manhattan. Kelly balanced work with school, attending classes until 10 p.m. four nights a week at Fordham after working long days at the law firm.

Patterson Belknap hired him as an associate in 1988 after he graduated. He was the first attorney at the firm to work his way up through the ranks.

Now a partner in the high-powered Washington, D.C. law firm Dickstein Shapiro, LLC, the Long Island native leads the firm’s Corporate and Finance group, which includes more than 50 lawyers and other professionals who structure and negotiate complex corporate, finance and real estate transactions. He also sits on the executive committee for the firm, which employs more than 350 lawyers.
“I took an immediate liking to transactional business work back at Patterson Belknap,” Kelly said. “You need the analytics, the knowledge of the law and the ability to apply both in a setting that is often very dynamic. At the end of the day, business, from the legal perspective, is about solving problems and helping your clients meet their goals. I like doing deals – getting parties together to do something constructive.”

“PRO BONO WORK IS A WAY TO GIVE BACK. IT’S PART OF OUR FIRM’S MISSION.”

In 1990, Kelly’s interest in transactional law and his then-girlfriend, now-wife, SueEllen, were what attracted him to move to Washington, D.C. and join Dickstein Shapiro, he said. “I had had a tremendous experience at Patterson Belknap and still stay in touch with friends there, but in hindsight, my move to D.C. was very well timed professionally and personally. SueEllen and I have been married for 22 years and have four children, ages 12 to 20.”

During his junior year at Assumption, Kelly began to consider a career in the law. He credits his professors for spurring him into taking a more mature and focused approach to his studies and his future. “Professor Patrick Powers had a strong influence on the career path I chose,” said Kelly, a politics major. “He also helped me to grow up. Ken Moyinihan AP’64 in history and Wayne Rollins in theology were excellent professors. Heading into my junior year, I decided that going into law would marry my practical and intellectual interests.”

While at Dickstein Shapiro, Kelly has done extensive pro bono work, most recently completing a six-year stint on the Advisory Committee for the Community Economic Development Project for the District of Columbia Bar’s pro bono program. He is often invited to speak about business issues for pro bono attorneys who serve small businesses in D.C. Kelly received a 2009 Outstanding Achievement Award from the District of Columbia Bar Association, among other honors.

“The pro bono work is a way to give back,” he said. “It’s part of our firm’s mission, but it’s also something every attorney should do. It’s about lending your time and your expertise to those who don’t have the ability to pay for it.”

Kelly’s Assumption education still drives how he approaches his work, his clients and his colleagues. “I came away from the College with a profound appreciation for personal relationships and community, and a strong sense of how to interact in the wider world. Assumption also did a very good job of teaching us the importance of integrity, and conducting ourselves in ways that reflect clearly who we are and what we stand for. My time at Assumption was the most formative four years of my life.”

“As we go through the college search process for the third time, my wife and I tell our kids that they should be searching for the college that fits them. One very significant indication that Assumption fit me is not so much what I do today, but it’s that 30 years after I graduated, my college friends are still some of the best I have. My five roommates and I communicate regularly. We try to have an annual Christmas dinner with our spouses. We keep each other grounded – and when we are together, we have lots of fun.”

Kelly offers this advice to Assumption students considering law school. “In this challenging economic environment, attending law school is a choice that needs to be made with eyes wide open. The law is a profession in radical transformation. Today’s students need to look clearly at what they want to get out of law school before they apply. It’s a great career, but it’s a lot harder now to succeed than it was 10 years ago.”

In 2010, Jim Kelly had what can be best described as a horrible skiing accident in Utah. He broke both hips, shattered a femur and suffered head trauma. He spent two weeks in the shock trauma unit of a Salt Lake City hospital, and then was flown on a medi-assisted flight back to Rockville, Maryland, where he lives. Kelly was admitted to Adventist Rehabilitation Hospital of Maryland, an award-winning acute rehabilitation hospital in Rockville.

“I was in really bad shape,” Kelly said. “I spent the next six-and-a-half months in intensive rehab, getting around the first three months after the accident in a wheelchair, and then progressing to crutches, and finally a cane.”

The morning after he arrived, Adventist’ Hospital’s chief medical officer came to Kelly’s room and began to assess him for cognitive damage.

“The doctor said he wanted to do a little relational test,” Kelly said. “He said three words, ‘Founders, Alumni and Greyhounds.’ Those words were familiar to me, but I was still too foggy to come up with an answer. Then he looked at me and said, ‘Assumption College. You were two years ahead of me and you were president of the student body.’”

The physician was Terrence Sheehan, M.D. ’86. Sheehan and his team did a tremendous job of helping Kelly to cope with his injuries and guided him down a very long road to recovery. “It was like a touch on the shoulder from God to know that Terry Sheehan was my principal doctor and that he was orchestrating my recovery,” Kelly said. “It was as if God was saying, ‘Don’t worry, I have you covered.’” Terry brought together his outstanding team. He’s a wonderful doctor and a great guy.”