

Rock & Role: GC Finds Solid Ground in Stone Business

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Pictured: Christian A. "Chris" Garza, director, general counsel and secretary for Cosentino North America in Houston

David Toney, head of the construction and real estate team for Adams and Reese in Houston

Jacob Monty, managing partner of Monty & Ramirez, a labor and immigration boutique in Houston



While a Yale Law School student, Texas native Christian A. "Chris" Garza says he never imagined he'd be doing the work he does today.

"In law school, you didn't really know what in-house practice was," says Garza, director, general counsel and secretary for Cosentino North America in Houston. "At Yale, most aspire to become politicians or professors or law firm partners."



Cosentino is a privately held business that manufactures and supplies stone and quartz construction surface products such as bathroom and kitchen counters. The company has manufacturing facilities in Europe and about 700 employees in the United States in warehouse, fabrication and display centers, he says. Garza joined the company in January, and his legal department includes one other lawyer and three nonlawyer managers.



But initially, like many of his classmates, Garza imagined himself working toward partnership at a law firm.

Garza grew up in San Antonio and earned a bachelor's degree in liberal arts and government at the University of Texas in Austin.

"I always wanted to be a lawyer; my dad was a lawyer," he says. His father, Richard Garza, of the Law Offices of Richard L. Garza, practices family and personal injury law in San Antonio. "I met a lot of lawyers growing up. I always wanted to be like my dad."

After graduating from law school in 2001, Garza worked as an associate with the appellate group of [Vinson & Elkins](#) in Houston where he had been a summer associate. He was with V&E for almost a year before beginning a one-year clerk's position with 5th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals Judge Carolyn Dineen King in Houston, who was then the chief judge.

After the clerkship he joined King and Spalding in Houston where the firm was developing an appellate group.

About four years later, in 2007, Garza decided to make a career change.

"I realized appellate practice was not best suited for my personality and skill set," he says. "I enjoyed writing — but not 90 percent of the time. I wanted more interaction with clients. I wanted to get more business knowledge."

Houston-based CITGO Petroleum Corp. recently had moved its legal department from Tulsa, Okla., to Houston and was looking to fill some in-house counsel positions, he says. He joined the company as a corporate counsel.

"That was kind of the big career change for me," Garza says.

At CITGO Garza says he was exposed to many different areas of law — real estate, finance, litigation management — and worked with general managers and vice presidents.

"It really broadened my horizons," he says. "It just changed my career path for the better."

He was a CITGO senior corporate counsel when a recruiter contacted him about a GC opening at Cosentino North America. The company was moving its legal department to Houston, and its top lawyer, then based in Plymouth, Minn., did not want to make the move. The job attracted Garza.

"Obviously, it was an opportunity to be a GC and head of a legal department and build my own team here and get managerial experience," he says. "It was also an opportunity to grow with the company."

He joined Cosentino in January. His legal department includes one other lawyer, a real estate manager, a health and safety manager, and a corporate compliance manager. Garza

says he uses outside counsel with specialized expertise in areas such as immigration, trademarks and product warranties.

David Toney, head of the construction and real estate team for [Adams and Reese](#) in Houston, works with Garza on best practices related to product warranties and building-product literature. He says Garza is forward-thinking, as the GC demonstrated when first introducing the firm to Cosentino.

"He set up a meeting for me and a partner with his entire legal department and customer service team — a lunch and learn — for all of us to get on the same page," Toney says. "It was an easy, quick way for us to get up to speed on his internal clients' needs."

Jacob Monty is managing partner of Monty & Ramirez, a labor and immigration boutique in Houston.

"A lot of GCs think immigration is boring and tedious and don't give us much direction," Monty says. "But Chris wants to understand the general process and what can go wrong, the time frame and the budget. He knows the right questions to ask, and he can describe what he wants us to achieve in pretty good terms."

During the past six months, Garza says, he has had a lot of on-the-job training.

"The other managers at the company teach me about the business, what we do, what our priorities are, who are our customers, and how do we keep them happy," he says. "I love the job. I love being in-house. I love the fact that, in-house, you are the attorney the business managers will turn to. In law school I thought I would be a law school professor or an appellate lawyer, and I turned out to be a GC."