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Law

Profiles in leadership: Client list: one; to-do list: endless

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Roberto N. Allen, a Baltimore lawyer, holds a bachelor's degree in electrical engineering and mathematics — but he still couldn't have predicted he would end up in his current vocation.

"If somebody five years ago had asked me 'where do you see yourself in five years,' I never would have answered 'general counsel for a biotech company,'" he said from his fourth-floor office at Alba Therapeutics Corp.

Allen took on the job last year when Alba's prior attorney left for private practice — Allen's former realm. In 2004, when he was recognized with The Daily Record's Leadership in Law award, Allen was a senior associate in the business department at Saul Ewing LLP, where he practiced labor and employment law. He left the firm a year later to become president of Respira Medical Inc., a Baltimore-based respiratory and home health care provider, and then joined Alba in June 2006.

"I've always been interested in trying new things and new challenges," said Allen. "The hardest part has been the change in workload," he added, referring to his patent responsibilities for the company's clinical trials and lab development, as well as his role in fund-raising campaigns.

Alba was co-founded in 2004 by Alessio Fasano, a professor at the University of Maryland School of Medicine, and Blake M. Paterson. Fasano discovered zonulin, which may be used to treat celiac disease, an auto-immune illness characterized by intestinal inflammation and intolerance to gluten, a protein commonly found in wheat products.

Pushing to the limit

In private practice, Allen said, he enjoyed a diversity of clients. But although his client list has shrunk to one, his "to-do" list is endless. Now based in the University of Maryland's BioPark campus, the fledgling company has grown from 15 employees to 44 in the past year and is in its second phase of clinical trials — all of which keeps its general counsel very busy.

Along with creating and managing the clinical-trial contracts with hospitals around the country and soon in the Western Hemisphere, Allen handles the patent applications for the lab development work.

"One of the challenges has been the growth of the company," Allen said. "Now that our lab is fully staffed, they are developing more technologies, which means more patent coverage."

Last year, he said, the company filed for only "a handful" of patents, whereas this year it is on pace to file for more than 30.

"People are pushed to the limit constantly," he said. "It's always a challenge to manage the growth and match the resources of a company at the same time."



Money-raising also has been a vital responsibility for Allen. A past president of the Baltimore Hispanic Chamber of Commerce and current board member of both Goodwill Industries of the Chesapeake and the American Red Cross Greater Chesapeake & Potomac Blood Region, Allen is no stranger to the fund-raising arena.

He is now focused on Alba's campaign to raise \$40 million in private equity while searching for a large pharmaceutical partner that can market the product worldwide. Zonulin also has potential as a treatment for other ailments such as inflammatory bowel disease, Crohn's disease and asthma.

"The end result is that we're changing lives," Allen said, adding that he is proud of the company's product and excited about its potential. As someone with a legal, business and science background, he said, he is enjoying working with a mix of legal and business issues.

"Biotech is growing and there seems to be no end in sight for things to do around here," Allen said. He noted that both his roles, in senior management and as Alba's only in-house attorney, keep him involved in most of the important business decisions at the company. "For me," he said, "it's the perfect marriage of law and business."