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40 Years and 35 Offices Later, Quinn Emanuel Still 'an Unfinished Project' Co-Founder John Quinn Says

By Dan Roe
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John Quinn—litigator, law firm founder, sushi restaurant owner, marathoner, father of five—has a lot of stamina.

That stamina is reflected in his decades-long career building Quinn Emanuel Urquhart & Sullivan from the ground up into a multi-billion-dollar litigation machine, ranked No. 20 in the Am Law 100 with more than 1,100 attorneys and a unique litigation-only business model.

Having stepped away from firm leadership earlier in 2026, the 74-year-old Quinn—a 2026 American Lawyer Lifetime Achievement honoree—has more time to devote to his wide array of extracurriculars, although he plans to continue to help his firm grow.

It wasn't a straightforward path for Quinn to create a global litigation empire, no matter how Quinn says he was destined to become a litigator. Prior to founding Quinn Emanuel in 1986, Quinn, the seventh of eight children in his family, explored other paths forward, including a stint in transactional law.

"There were a lot of lawyers in the family. And my grandfather was a lawyer, so it was always in the back of my head that it was something I could do," Quinn recalled. "I also resisted it—when I was in college, I found a love of ancient Greece and tried to learn modern Greek. I had my naval career, and I considered academia and an advanced degree in history or English, but ultimately those were fantasies that I was considering to avoid the inevitable."



Courtesy photo

John Quinn, with Quinn Emanuel Urquhart & Sullivan.

After graduating from Harvard Law School in 1976, Quinn started his legal career at Cravath, Swaine & Moore. Despite an interest in litigation, which spoke to Quinn's competitive nature and penchant for writing, Cravath needed transactional associates, and so Quinn began his legal career as a transaction attorney in New York.

Two years later, Quinn joined a small shop in Los Angeles, a stint that lasted two months before he and a partner at that boutique attempted to start their own firm, Baker & Quinn; a lack of local connections and marketing experience meant the firm was short-lived. Quinn then launched a Los Angeles office for Reboul MacMurray Hewitt & Maynard, a New York private equity focused firm that was later absorbed by Ropes & Gray.

"They didn't have much work, so it was up to us. One of the things I learned—when you have to do things and you have no choice, you can do things you didn't know you could do," Quinn reflected. "I was not at all a natural business developer. I wasn't a gregarious person. But I had to do it, we needed to do it to keep the wolf from the door."

Three of the five Reboul MacMurray LA attorneys later left with Quinn to create the firm that would, one day, become a 35-office litigation behemoth. Quinn Emanuel's first partner hire was Eric Emanuel and later, Bill Urquhart, whom Quinn credits with envisioning the massive growth that brought the firm into the Am Law 100.

Despite describing Urquhart as "Mr. Outside," "the kind of person who saw the potential in things," and "a great builder of talent", Quinn was also intimately involved in the firm's growth trajectory and still recites by memory the order in which the firm hired key partners and launched new offices.

"There's a story behind every office," Quinn said, describing the firm's launches in Silicon Valley and New York, among others.

"John built our firm with brilliance and boundless energy from four lawyers in Los Angeles to a wildly successful national litigation practice," said Kathleen Sullivan, a retired partner at Quinn Emanuel and founder of the firm's national appellate practice. "John Quinn is a legal visionary, a fearless leader, and a true Renaissance man."

Quinn described two turning points for the firm. The first was its decision to jump on an opportunity to oppose the world's largest banks, a prescient move just before the 2008 financial crisis that resulted in the firm recovering more than $60 billion for clients.

"If you had a claim against one of those banks, the full-service firms wouldn't touch it, since they have deal lawyers," Quinn recalled. "There was an unmet need in the marketplace."

The second turning point was the firm's shift to a global growth strategy, including investments in Asia and Europe. Quinn, ever a global traveler, recited the stories behind the firm's launches in London, Paris, Germany, Japan, China and Korea and elsewhere.

"John saw that because disputes often arise across borders, clients would value a firm whose litigation expertise crosses borders...and so he built our firm into the world's first truly global disputes practice," Sullivan said. "He was quite right that clients would gravitate to that unique and prescient model, and they have."

Over the past 40 years, Quinn has played a singular role in making major partnership decisions and shaping Quinn Emanuel into its current form. Despite stepping back from leadership in May, Quinn retains a non-executive chair title, remains a partner at the firm, and will serve as an ambassador focusing on client and business development going forward.

In short, he isn't slowing down or retiring any time soon.

"It's very much an unfinished project," he said, describing his and the firm's next frontier as addressing ongoing developments in AI and its implications for law firms and the law itself. "There's still so much we can do."

Honorees will be recognized at the 2026 American Lawyer Industry Awards on Nov. 12 in New York.

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