Young Guns

by Sean Boone

Some of them always knew they wanted to do it. Others had to be told. At the end of the day, however, Pensacola's young lawyers found themselves enrolling in law school and entering a profession that has a reputation for being as grueling as it is prestigious.

NED MCWILLIAMS

Ned McWilliams displayed the telltale symptoms early on.

"One of my teachers told me I could argue the spines off a cactus," he recalls with a smile.

McWilliams, now an associate attorney with Levin, Papantonio, Thomas, Mitchell, Echsnor & Proctor, combines his passion for "being very argumentative" with his love for the outdoors, practicing environmental protection law. After graduating from Cumberland Law School, he explains the decision to pursue the field of environmental law was an easy one.

"I've always appreciated nature. I guess I'm very fortunate in that I get to practice what I like."

While his love for Pensacola's beaches and bayous is easily visible in his work, Ned's cases are scattered around U.S. as well as the Gulf Coast, holding polluters accountable of groundwater, air, and soil contamination.

TYLER WHITE

For Tyler White, an attorney with Shell, Fleming, Davis & Menge, the idea of becoming a lawyer took longer to occur. In fact, he claims he had never considered the notion until college.

"I took a public speaking course," he remembers. "After my end of the semester speech my professor came up to me and said, you might want to think about law school."

The rest, as they say, is history. After White attended law school near the California beaches at Pepperdine, he returned to Pensacola. While admits that there was a lot he wasn't taught in school, particularly the "business side" of the law practice and the ins and outs of working with clients. Since being admitted to the bar in 2007, he's learning fast. He currently works with employers to resolve disputes involving race, gender and age discrimination, as well as serves as counsel for employment law cases.

SCOTT REMINGTON

Scott Remington always had law in his blood. His father, uncle, and brother-in-law are all lawyers, and ultimately he married one. Despite this exposure, he claims it was still a bit of a shock after law school to enter the unglamorous reality of long hours and low starting salary.

"If you picture yourself making gobs of money and enjoying lots of time off..."
from the beginning," he says, "then this isn't the profession for you."
Remington insists, however, that the opportunity to help people outweighs the long hours.

"In virtually every instance I represent someone," he explains, "the outcome of the case will have a significant impact on their future. In many instances the speed at which a case moves can be the difference between someone losing or saving their business."

Remington focuses his practice mainly on commercial litigation, representing banks, small businesses, and individuals. As an attorney with Clark, Parlington, Larry, Bond, & Stackhouse, his cases have ranged from high profile to humorous. Years ago, he represented himself in a case involving a fine for swimming in a hotel pool after hours.

"I learned that arguing constitutional law to a police officer is not always a wise thing to do," he laughs.

JOE ZARZAUR

A young Pensacola attorney with his own practice, Joe Zarzaur applies the same dedication in his work as he does his personal life. In 2004, he completed an Ironman race in Brazil a difficult triathelon that involves swimming 2.4 miles, biking 112 miles, and finally running a full marathon.

"Training for the race was like another job," Zarzaur recalls, though these days he only has time to train for half-triathelons. While the prospect of waking up daily at 5am to run may sound crazy to some, Zarzaur shrugs it off.

"It's what keeps me sane." As a child, Joe was always attracted to the trial lawyer mystique, and remembers idolizing Atticus Finch from To Kill a Mockingbird. After law school, he worked for an insurance company, but soon grew tired of working for a big company.

"They were hardly the underdog," he quips.

Zarzaur worked for McKenzie and Taylor in Pensacola before starting his own practice. Since then, he has represented a range of clients, including Pensacola track star and Olympian Justin Gatlin.

Now, with offices in Mobile and Pensacola, Zarzaur focuses on the area of law that interests him the most: working with those who have been wrongfully injured.

"I believe in the system," Zarzaur says. "I'm in this business to help people."

KIM LAMBERT

Unlike many of her classmates, Kim Lambert didn't encounter many surprises in law school. Lambert had been working as a paralegal for nine years prior to enrolling in Loyola Law School in New Orleans. Now an attorney with Levin, Papantonio, Thomas, Mitchell, Echiner & Proctor, Lambert works on product liability cases, defending victims hurt by big businesses looking to cut corners.

Her cases include everything from jetski and ATV accidents to medical malpractice and faulty heart device cases. Often, the compelling personal stories of the victim drive home her passion for her work.

Working on a recent case investigating the link between antidepressants and birth defects, she recalls that the gravity of the situation really "raised the stakes personally."

Kim's favorite part of the job is the quick pace of the profession and the opportunity to help people who otherwise lack the resources to a fair trial.

"I love defending the rights of the everyday person." As one of the six women at the firm, Kim believes gender is becoming less of an issue in the industry. "More and more," she says, "women are creating their own niche in the legal profession."

Her advice for those thinking about law school? Just do it.

"It's not exactly a cake walk," she concedes, "but it will give you an incredibly marketable degree."

JOHN TRAWICK

John Trawick has practiced construction and commercial law at McDonald, Fleming, Moorhead, Ferguson for more than 12 years. While he didn't enter law school with an interest in the construction industry, early in his career a partner placed a file containing a construction dispute on his desk.
"One day I woke up and it was all I was doing," he laughs. All the hard work has clearly paid off, and in 2007 Trawick was made a partner at the firm. A sign of the economic times, Trawick notes that the focus of his cases has shifted as the construction industry has dramatically slowed down. These days, he explains, many contractors in the industry are suing for money they never received. For young law school grads searching for jobs in the current economic market, he advises flexibility and persistence.

"You really have to like your job," he cautions, "because it's not all glamour; it's a lot of sitting in front of your computer and working late hours."

JOHN BEROSET

After seeing his friends slip in the local economy, John Beroset decided he'd follow in his parents' footsteps and make a legal profession.

"I was at the University of Alabama majoring in finance and had no interest in going to law school," he says. "My mother and father are both lawyers in town and I saw the jobs other people were getting in town and I told myself I didn't want to do that."

After getting accepted to law school at Florida, Beroset realized he wanted to get into the thick of things right after he got out of school.

"I knew as soon as I got into law school I wanted to get into criminal defense," he says. "Coming out of school I talked to a lot of criminal defense lawyers and they said I should be a prosecutor first."

Working for three years as a prosecutor taught him a lot he says, but he ultimately knew he belonged working at his father's side in the Beroset and Keene law firm.

"Probably the best thing I've done so far was doing a couple trials with my father," he says. "Both were over a week long and a dream come true and a lot of fun. Getting to work with him is an honor."

JUSTIN WITKIN

Law was always in Justin Witkin's blood. At an early age he realized he loved to debate and wanted to go into a profession that gave him the opportunity to do so on a regular basis.

"I don't know if there was one event (that got me into law)," he says. "It was just something that I knew what I was going to do."

After getting his law degree from the University of Florida and then working under the Levin firm, Witkin branched out to create a firm in 2001.

Today the law firm of Aylstock, Witkin, Kreis, and Overholtz prides itself as young and accomplished.

"We started the firm with two people," he says. "Today we are at 12 and have 40 staff members that represent thousands across the country and have recovered billions in assets."

"I don't know many other attorneys in the area that have that track record."

JODI COOKE

Jodi Cooke is lifelong resident of Pensacola, who was inspired to go into law by her grandfather.

"Grandfather gave me a different perspective on being an attorney," she says. "He was a litigator. While he was known for being one of the best in town, he was known for being fair and I couldn't help but respect him for that."

Cooke is now a fresh face at the Beggs and Lane Law firm—the same firm her grandfather once was the managing partner and sat on the board of governors with.

She says that although she's only been an attorney for less than a year, she really enjoys it due to the people she is around.

"The best part of being an attorney for me is being on a great firm," she says. "There is always someone to point you in the right directions. I see me sticking around for the duration (in Pensacola). This is my home and this is where my husband's home is."

As rising stars, Pensacola's outstanding lawyers were full of advice for wanna-be attorneys. Many cite the fact that law school did not really prepare them for the real world of practicing law, and that day-to-day reality involved long hours and lots of additional learning.
The most important thing, all agree, is to find an area of law that you loved.

"Do what you like," Zarzaur advises. "Don't pick a career or type of law based on what others might tell you. You've got be motivated to represent other people, and unless you're passionate you're going to have a hard time doing that."

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