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Entitled to Justice

By Jan Jaben-Eilon



“*Law should be reserved for those who want to make a difference.*”

Atlanta personal injury attorney Ronnie B. Wotorson always knew he wanted to be a lawyer. But during college the founder of The Wotorson Firm LLP worked as a sales manager for various national retailers. By the time he graduated, he had a lot of responsibility and was doing well in corporate America. “But I never thought I’d continue in the corporate world and not go to law school,” he says.

“In companies, it’s all about numbers, not about people. It’s all about revenues and margins and there’s no personal aspect to it. I trained my large staff to find balance between the two, but it wasn’t the type of life I wanted. People matter,” explains Wotorson, who was recently named among the Top 100 Trial Lawyers in the country, as well as nominated for The Top 40 Under 40 Lawyers in the United States. He also recently won the Esquire Award from the National Bar Association.

When he finally enrolled in law school, he was open-minded about the type of law he wanted to practice. He had a variety of internships including in the District Court of Maryland working with victims of domestic violence and the Maryland attorney general’s office mediating consumer disputes with companies. “That was my first taste of helping people fight against companies, of helping people go up against the powers that be,” he says.

While working with Willie Gary and Tricia “CK” Hoffer, the well-known attorneys with the prestigious national law firm of Gary, Williams, Parenti, Finney, Lewis, Watson & Sperando, he focused on personal injury law and commercial litigation. “I knew without a shadow of a doubt that that would be my calling.”

Looking back on his childhood, it’s not surprising he ended up as a personal injury attorney. Not only were several cousins practicing law, but his uncle was the senate pro temp of the Liberian Senate and his dad also held a high position in government. “They always held high positions in the government since I was born,” says the Liberian-born Wotorson.

“We came to this country at the start of a brutal war which lasted almost two decades,” he recalls. “I remember seeing how people can be mistreated, seeing that made me want to help people. They are so helpless in situations like that.” The traumatic experience led him to one of the most powerful lessons he has gained from practicing law.

“The littlest person can have a dramatic impact,” he states. “A lot of corporations can take advantage of people because they feel they are nobody. Without the law, we could never make a corporation answer your questions, and get them to pay for any wrongdoing. The law makes them have to answer to someone they think is a nobody. It’s powerful.”

Early on in his practice, Wotorson was hired by a woman in her late 70s who was up against a company that had built her home in a subdivision. It was so poorly constructed that when it rained, all the water ended up in her backyard, completely flooding and ruining it. “The woman wanted answers,” he says, and the company wasn’t even responding to her phone calls and letters. Wotorson was attracted to the people aspect of the case. “You must look at that and measure the impact on a person’s life, not just look at the numbers and how much money you will make on the case.” It didn’t start off as a big case. All she wanted was answers and perhaps reimbursement on her life savings spent repairing her backyard. They sued and won – not only a verdict but punitive damages to punish the company “because of the way the company had treated my client.”

In another case, Wotorson filed a lawsuit against international media giant Viacom International, Inc., MTV, Clifford J. Harris, Jr. (aka the rapper, T.I.), a local Atlanta funeral home and several others. While Wotorson cannot discuss or comment on the

case, the 35-page and 300-plus paragraph complaint lays out a case involving 17 parties and 24 counts. According to the complaint, the defendants filmed and aired on national television the body of a recently deceased man without the permission of his family and referred to him as a hustler on a TV show starring the rapper, T.I. According to court records, the lawsuit was filed in 2011 and resolved in 2014.

“My practice, which I opened in 2006, is built on my reputation and the work I do for my clients. I have three lawyers and a third of counsel and support staff. It’s a small practice and I don’t want it to be big. Smaller firms get to be more focused on the clients. Whenever there’s a new development, we call the client. While interning and working for firms prior to starting my practice, I learned that the client’s number one complaint is lack of communication from their lawyer, so we have a sundown rule: If you get a call from a client, you must return the call before sundown of the same day,” Wotorson says.

“Our slogan is ‘Your Voice, in the Pursuit of Justice.’ That means we will be your voice against whomever the wrongdoer happens to be. We can’t guarantee a win or even that you’ll get justice, but you will not be silenced or go away quietly. Your voice will be heard and almost always, you’ll get sweet justice,” he explains.

When asked what advice he’d give to someone interested in pursuing law, he responds, “Interested is a word I would want to clarify. I was passionate when I was in law school, so the material came easily to me, and I graduated with honors. I was just happy being there. I sat in that chair and thought, ‘I’m finally here.’ While other students were stressed about taking exams, I was excited and happy. Some of them were interested in law because their parents expected them to go into law, or they thought it was a glamorous and lucrative profession,” says Wotorson.

“If that’s your interest, do something else. Law should be reserved for those who want to make a difference.”

“One of my most satisfying undertakings was one for which I did not get paid,” Wotorson adds. “It wasn’t even in my practice

area.” In 2014, Wotorson filed an appeal pro bono in the Georgia Court of Appeals on behalf of an African-American teen convicted of aggravated assault. Although he practiced personal injury law, he was not without experience in the area of criminal law. Like a lot of personal injury trial lawyers, Wotorson started his career in criminal law. “You get a tremendous amount of trial experience doing criminal law. You’re literally in court every day and the process moves a lot quicker.”

This case was unique, Wotorson explains. The defendant was a high school senior about to graduate. On the night in question, the teen along with one of his friends called a cab to go to another friend’s birthday party. An altercation ensued between the teens and the cab driver, the cab driver was pepper sprayed and the teens jumped out of the moving cab injuring themselves. The teens were charged and convicted of aggravated assault and sentenced to 15 years in prison. “This was the teen’s first arrest and conviction,” Wotorson says.

That case stood out for multiple reasons. The cab driver, a middle-aged Caucasian man, had a long felony record including armed robbery, burglary, theft and fraud. Charges for some of the cab driver’s felonies were brought by the very same district attorney who prosecuted the teen. Moreover, at least one of the cab driver’s felonies was presided over by the same judge who presided over the teen’s case in which the cab driver is now the alleged victim. Notwithstanding his life lengthy felony record, the cab driver spent no more than two years in prison combined

for all his crimes while this teen was sentenced to 15 years for his first. “It’s simply not fair,” Wotorson continued, “and someone has to stand up for what is right. I didn’t get into law to make money; I was called to it to make a difference.”

Wotorson takes great pride in his firm’s summer intern program. “They get to have real-life experience. When I was interning, I did real work that helped shape me.”

But he acknowledges that he is still being “shaped.”

“I am nowhere near where I want to be,” he says. “I am never comfortable and when I’m not preparing for trial, I’m watching other trials, attending CLEs and always learning.” Wotorson’s love of traveling takes him around the world where he learns a lot about himself. “Your exposure helps you learn how to treat people. That exposure is invaluable. My international experience absolutely helped shape the person I am.”

“I get my legal skills and passion for

justice from my mentors Willie Gary and CK Hoffler who continue to impact my professional life. I get my drive and determination from my mother who worked multiple jobs and still found time to get advanced degrees late in life while raising children. She never gave up on me fulfilling my dreams even as I took off years after college and worked in corporate America,” said Wotorson, oldest of four. “She taught me it’s never too late to achieve your dream. I dedicate this article to my brother who is no longer with us but was the most driven and passionate person I’ve ever known. He always believed in me and he still inspires and guides my decisions to be the very best every day. Although I was older, I learned and continue to learn a great deal from him. No one expects life to be fair. Justice is fairness that you are entitled to. I will continue to fight for that fairness for the injured and people who have lost a loved one to negligence.”



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