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40 LEGAL RISING STARS TO WATCH under Forty



JOHN JETT

Associate, Kilpatrick Townsend & Stockton



JOHN DISNEY

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JOHN JETT DIDN'T grow up intending to be a lawyer. He wanted to be a history professor.

After growing up in Roswell (where he says Georgia natives like himself are akin to the proverbial unicorn), he went to Stanford University and majored in history.

But, he says, his parents encouraged him to consider the law. "They saw some combative streak or something," he says, and they suggested he take the LSAT exam "and see how it goes." The University of Georgia, where he earned his J.D., was the only law school where he applied.

Jett, 33, is an associate at Kilpatrick Townsend & Stockton.

Kilpatrick chairman J. Henry Walker IV, calls Jett "mature beyond his years" with "an even temperament and the ability to instill confidence in clients, colleagues, and courts." Jett, he adds, "has started to generate business for the firm far beyond what we expect for someone at his stage of practice."

He has also contributed hundreds of hours to pro bono causes, including his work as general counsel to the Urban League of Greater Atlanta, litigation on behalf of state prison inmates, and pro bono projects for a battered women's shelter.

Jett says he thrives on pro bono work, which Kilpatrick encourages, because, "I have kind of a sentimental view of the law and a sentimental view of lawyering. It just means a lot to me to be a part of the process when hopefully it's working ... [and] to give to people who haven't necessarily had a chance to have high-quality legal services. A lot of people have had to fend for themselves, to make do. I have found it very, very satisfying to give those people their day in court, and a fair shake."

Two cases to which Jett has devoted innumerable hours stand out. The first was a federal case filed by a 60-year-old inmate who said he had been beaten and had his arm dislocated during an altercation with a Fulton County deputy. The inmate, Michael

Negron, had managed to keep the suit he filed against the deputy alive for two years when Jett stepped in to help.

Jett says that although the jury found in favor of the deputy, his client "got to tell his story, and he told his story the way he wanted. He felt that justice had been done, that the system had finally worked for him, even though he didn't win."

Jett says another inmate client, a drug offender who had been serving life without parole under the state's three strikes law, was recently released from prison under a new state law allowing for the parole of some nonviolent drug offenders who had been serving nonparolable life sentences.

For four years, Jett fought to toss out Darion Barker's sentence, arguing that his earlier guilty pleas had been legally invalid, and he should never have been sentenced to prison for life. Jett said a Cordele Circuit judge eventually was persuaded and overturned Barker's sentence. But prosecutors appealed, and the state Supreme Court reversed the lower court judge. Jett then petitioned the U.S. Supreme Court to hear the case. The high court turned him down.

But the case had a happy ending, Jett says, when Barker became the first inmate released under the new state law earlier this year. "All lawyers sometimes see the system does not work the way it should," he says. "It's very meaningful to see it work correctly."

—R. Robin McDonald

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