



Profile: Khaldoun Baghdadi

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BY STEPHEN ELLISON

Perseverance is a common tale in the law community, and very few symbolize that story as does Khaldoun Baghdadi.

The partner with Walkup, Melodia, Kelly & Schoenberger was born in Jordan and migrated to the U.S. with his family when he was a child. He never lost sight of his Palestinian roots and could not stem his desire to help his immigrant family and community, so he chose law.

“I think there’s a belief, especially in immigrant families, that once you get a lawyer in the family you get a better sense of what your rights are and what others’ rights are with respect to you – I think that was the primary draw,” Baghdadi said. “The narrative of being a Palestinian, and my mom originally starting in a refugee camp in 1948 – that’s a story that’s hard to keep out of your mind when you’re deciding what you want to do with your education and whether or not you want to help people. So, I think the idea of being driven, determined about giving back to those who can use your help and use your skill, it certainly informed the direction I wanted to go.”

Education also played a large part in Baghdadi’s choices. He studied political science and said learning about the civil rights movement as an undergrad student provided extra motivation for making a difference.

“Learning how the Civil Rights Movement wasn’t just about marching and demonstration but also about active litigation, and seeing the role that the NAACP, Southern Poverty Law Center played, learning that you can affect real change in the courtroom, was really inspiring to me,” he said.

While Baghdadi initially had his sights set on international law, he soon



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realized it wasn’t what he set out to do. When he began interviewing with such firms, he quickly found out they were just doing corporate law in different languages, he said. For

someone who wanted to be in trial and litigation, it just wasn’t the right fit, and he kept looking. He said he felt more drawn to the plaintiff lawyer narrative of working hard and smart and actually knowing your clients.

Connecting with people’s lives

“I always just felt I’d be better able to connect with people I knew,” he explained. “At the end of the day, I knew there would be plenty of people representing large multinationals, plenty of people representing insurance companies, auto manufacturers, and that my personal cultural philosophy was on the side of those who needed me more. And I found much more peace within myself in being able to do that, and much more satisfaction not just doing good law but doing good things.”

Baghdadi joined the Walkup firm in 1998 and has since become one of the top trial lawyers in Northern California, having obtained several seven-figure verdicts in areas such as product defect, wrongful death, public transit injuries and medical negligence, among others. He has been recognized in the legal community for his achievements in the courtroom as well as his professional and ethical standards.

In addition to his individual accomplishments in law, Khaldoun has been active in academic circles and the community. He served as adjunct instructor at UC Berkeley School of Law, where he taught trial advocacy, and served as an adjunct professor at UC Hastings College of the Law. He also taught trial technique, deposition practice and lawyering skills for the National Institute of Trial Advocacy.

Baghdadi served the city of San Francisco by way of mayoral appointment to the San Francisco Human Rights Commission, and in 2006, he was elected chair of that body.

Staying true to his heritage

While Baghdadi was born overseas, he essentially was raised in the U.S. Yet he was taught at a young age to not lose touch with his heritage.

“We tried to spend as many summers back in the Middle East, where the rest of the family was,” he recalled. “We were very much a bicultural family. We spoke Arabic at home; not that (my family) didn’t want us to be active and engaged as Americans, but there was an important sense that we recognized who we were and where we came from.”

Baghdadi attended UC Irvine for his undergrad education and earned his law degree from UC Hastings. After his brief pursuit of international law, he was hired by the Walkup firm, where he fulfilled his goal of becoming a trial lawyer. At the time, he hadn’t envisioned he would still be at the firm 20 years later, but he chalked up his lengthy stay to the “guidance and mentorship of a truly exceptional group of attorneys.” As for the future, Baghdadi said he wants to continue to try cases, teach more at the local law schools, and help younger lawyers learn from their mistakes.



Baghdadi said he's developed an approach he learned from trying cases with some of the best trial lawyers in the country. That approach involves both confidence and humility, as well as integrity, sincerity and hard work, he said. Establishing credibility with the defense, being mindful of the jury's time and being yourself also are crucial when going to trial, he added.

"I think the most effective trial lawyers are very much themselves in front of a jury because there's an honesty to the most effective trial lawyers that you can't replicate," he said. "You can't pretend to be someone you are not in front of a jury, and juries can figure that out pretty quick. You can draw from other styles, which is what trial lawyers do, but you can't just copy what someone like Rich Schoenberger does and think that's going to work. You have to have a confidence in yourself and an honesty in yourself in terms of adopting a style."

Baghdadi said it's also important for him to never make a promise he can't keep, recognize the difficulties in his case and address them at the outset, speak a language that jurors understand and have the courage to let the client's story speak for itself.

"Make sure the focus is on the client and not on you," he said, "because it's not about you."

Losing helps winning

While Baghdadi has plenty of memorable verdicts and settlements under his belt, he said in terms of his development as a trial lawyer, every case he's lost has stayed with him; every defeat has left a mark. His first solo jury trial 15 years ago was a medical negligence case in Modesto, a very difficult case to begin with, and the firm had the confidence in him to let him go it on his own.

"I can still remember every witness and every examination in that trial," he said. "Remembering the intensity of that moment and the responsibility I felt for my client and trying a case against an attorney who had decades more experience

than I did, and having to stand up to the defense and the court while at the same time fighting my own insecurities that I wasn't sure about the law, evidence code and otherwise. That experience of having to shoulder it on my own was extremely intense, and I learned so much from it. It's usually those cases that haven't gone the way you want them to, or how you tried to get them to go, where you learn to adjust and adapt and move forward."

Years later, he tried and won two hip implant cases, saying that's when he first learned how well a team of lawyers can work together as long as they work hard, combine efforts and not worry about where the credit falls at the end of the day.

Another case that Baghdadi perhaps won't ever forget involved the wrongful death of a child. He said it was probably the most emotional experience he's ever had in the courtroom. The biggest challenge, he said, was knowing how emotionally raw it stayed for his client and the jurors.

"When you're around that level of intensity of emotion, the things you normally worry about seem to fade away," he said. "In other words, you're not so worried about the font on your PowerPoint when you're talking about the death of a child. Our challenge is to maintain the dignity of the case and afford our client the respect for their loss that they deserve. It's an unspeakable loss, and so how do you stand for that person in a way that doesn't diminish it, that doesn't make it appear as if you're grabbing or overreaching in terms of damages?"

"Being able to honestly deal with the emotional dignity of that case, I learned a lot," he added, "about myself and about my ability to work under pressure."

Navigating crisis

Baghdadi revealed a personal watershed moment that he otherwise doesn't try to advertise. In 2010, his wife Amy went through cancer and chemotherapy, and it was one of the hardest times to reconcile being a busy lawyer and a dad and

a husband, he said. And he'll never forget his partners who supported him no matter what and allowed him to do what he needed to do to help his wife and family navigate through the illness.

"She's now doing well, and we're so thankful, but that experience sort of helped me distill and refine why we work hard for the people we work hard for," he said. "Definitely a wake-up call to understand what so many people go through when they try to navigate the health care system.

"It also helped me make better decisions about how I spend my time and for what," he continued. "Because when the very best part of you is in crisis, you need to quickly learn you only have so much reserve to deal with things. It really changed our lives and, in several ways, made us closer as a family and made me closer in relationships with those I care for and work with."

When he's not at the office or in trial, Baghdadi spends time coaching his kids in basketball, cooking family dinner on Sundays and traveling. "The kids are 12 and 14 now, so the challenge is to keep their attention," he said. "If we can do things together as a family that don't involve a screen, I think we're ahead of the game."

As a seasoned lawyer and teacher, Baghdadi is not averse to handing out advice, and he believes hearing and accepting the musings of an experienced attorney is a good place to start.

"There's no such thing as a self-made trial lawyer," he said. "All of the best things I've done in trial have been as a result of inspiration or lessons I've learned from those who have trained me. So, having the honesty and the courage to ask questions of those who have done this before, I think is essential. Work hard, be honest and don't worry so much about who gets credit. I think that's a pretty good formula."

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