



Profile: Jonathan Davis

Former labor union rep goes all in as a 'proactive' lawyer for the underdog

BY STEPHEN ELLISON

Devotion has multiple levels of depth, no matter the object, and in some people it may be difficult to gauge. But plaintiffs' attorney Jonathan Davis makes no bones about his zealous approach to his work as well as a similarly devout enthusiasm for family life.

Davis, the managing partner with the Arns Law Firm in San Francisco, believes passion, a sense of justice and a willingness to work hard are indeed crucial to the success of any plaintiffs' lawyer, even referencing a colleague's mantra to "Practice law like the client is in the office with you." But then he takes it a step further.

"I think empathy is a really important characteristic because we have to understand on some very deep level the suffering our clients and their families are going through," Davis said. "We have to be immersed in that in order to really embody the cause when we're standing in front of a jury. And just having a love for the challenges we face every day, looking at it like 'I love doing this.' I feel like that every day."

That daily devotion and dedication is not just about the client. It's also very much about the law. Davis considers himself a trial lawyer, but his interpretation of that aspect of the job is that he is more of a civil litigator. While a mere one out of every 10 cases goes to trial, he and his colleagues live and breathe litigation, he said, with depositions and discovery and use of subpoena power that puts pressure on the other side.

Davis thrives in that arena, to be sure, handling personal injury cases that often arise out of workplace incidents and product defects causing injuries or wrongful deaths. And when one of those cases does go to trial, there's nothing else like it, he said.

"I love going to trial. It is a full-on commitment," he said. "When you're in



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trial, it's like skiing in deep snow: You're all in, and you're fully committed, and that's what you are doing. And that's a great feeling, it's a great experience.

"It's exhilarating and exhausting and perilous, but in the end just a very gratifying way to work," Davis continued. "It's an honor to be able to do that. There aren't very many people who have the opportunity in life to go try cases and advocate for people who have been injured or wronged."

Davis and his team at the Arns firm recently took on a high-profile wrongful death case against Bay Area Rapid Transit. In July, 18-year-old Nia Wilson was stabbed to death in an apparent random attack at the MacArthur BART station in Oakland. A suspect was arrested and charged, but Wilson's family believes the transit agency failed to maintain its own standards for riders' safety.

"That has been a transformative experience for us on a number of levels," Davis said in August, "and hopefully we're going to get some civil justice for this family and make some changes within the BART system that will benefit everyone in the region who uses BART."

Davis also pointed out how, at the Arns firm, justice truly is for all. Four of its lawyers, including Davis, are bilingual, as are four associates, which broadens the firm's client base in such a way that reflects changes in demographics. It also allows them to communicate with people in their first language, "a great advantage,"

Davis said, because it puts people at ease when they can speak to the attorney in their native language.

"Because no one wants to be in a lawyer's office, right?" he said. "I always say to people, 'I'm sorry you're here, but we're glad you're here – we're going to take care of you.' The minute you walk in the door, you're part of our family. We're gonna take care of you like you're family."

Union rep turned plaintiffs' lawyer

Originally from Connecticut, Davis did not take the conventional route to the law profession. He graduated from Connecticut College in 1988 and went to work as an international representative and national field director for the Amalgamated Clothing and Textile Workers' Union. That was back in the day when there were still unions and factories that made textiles and clothing in the U.S., he said.

Davis traveled across the country, working on various campaigns, taking on manufacturers violating labor laws and financial institutions that were essentially underwriting the demise of those industries, he said.

"I worked with some very creative strategists, and we put pressure on entities to try to change their behavior," Davis recalled. "We had some successes and some failures because working in the labor movement is like dealing with a stacked deck."

"I was interacting with a lot of lawyers, and there were times I felt like the lawyers were telling us what we couldn't do, and I wanted to be a lawyer who told people what they could do," Davis continued. "I wanted to be a proactive lawyer that was taking the fight to the other side as opposed to being reactive. I worked with people that were very creative, and one of our iron rules of strategy was to always escalate, and when in

