



Profile: John Roach

Working at prominent plaintiffs' firms and finding a mentor leads to successful solo practice

BY STEPHEN ELLISON

Once out of law school, most lawyers likely are relieved to be done with all that studying and training. John Roach, however, is not among that majority.

For Roach, a sole practitioner based in San Francisco, part of being an effective trial attorney is continuing education, whether it's formal training via professional organizations or informal discussions with mentors or colleagues. The latter can be just as valuable as the former.

"I work in a building where on the eighth floor there's a handful of excellent attorneys, and we all have lunch often, where we compare notes," Roach said. "We even get together and preview our cases and get feedback. And there's a real synergy there. It's wonderful. ... As a solo practitioner it's good to have a group of attorneys you can run stuff by so you don't get stuck in your own ways, and you can see things from different perspectives. It's been very helpful. Even if you're on your own, as a solo practitioner, you don't have to do it alone – there're plenty of people who will talk with you."

In the beginning, as with most young lawyers, Roach worked for others and was fortunate there was a systematic mentor-pupil process with each turn. And it certainly helped that Roach at the time was green in the plaintiffs' law arena – enough so where he knew he needed to learn by listening and observing.

At the Dolan firm

"One of my first jobs out of law school was at Dolan Law Firm," he recalled. "It was interesting because the year I worked for him, he was the president of the Consumer Attorneys of California, so it gave me a real interesting preview into the cause of the plaintiff



Roach

community and how it really seeks justice for individuals as opposed to the insurance industry, which I've come to learn is a pretty nasty industry that doesn't value individuals, their health or life or love. They make billions a year and then nickel and dime these people who have been injured. Over the last 10 years, I've become a real believer in the cause."

At the Dolan firm, Roach was under the wing of Bryan Lamb, and to this day, he considers Lamb his mentor. Lamb, he said, has been instrumental in his career, in guiding him and giving him advice through virtually every step.

After a little more than a year at the Dolan firm, Roach moved on to the Scranton firm, where he handled a much larger caseload, upwards of 100 cases, he said. He was able to prepare some cases for trial but never quite made it to trial.

Then Roach got an opportunity to work for one of his heroes, Steve Brady.

"Steve was an excellent trial lawyer who invested a lot of resources in me when I did my jury trials and my first binding arbitration," Roach said.

"He really kind of pushed me out there to develop as a trial lawyer and get in front of juries. I'll always be grateful to him for that."

A loss at trial, then on his own

But there came a point where Roach wasn't evolving at the Brady Law Group, he said, and he was looking to forge his own path. At the time, he was a newlywed, and there were some economic factors, he said.

"Owning your own law firm can give you more financial independence as well as independence in life," Roach said. "So, it was a good time to split with Steve Brady. I had lost my last trial, and the relationship with the Brady firm kind of soured, and we both decided I should move on and do my own thing.

"I feel like I wouldn't have been able to evolve like I have if I was working for someone else," Roach continued. "Because when you work for someone else, they want to be the one to take the big cases and be the decision makers and kind of put you in a lane that's not the fast lane. So, with no hindrances, I've been able to develop as a lawyer over the last four and a half years, and I feel like I'm on the precipice of really coming into my own right now."

Sweeping chimneys

Roach grew up in Southern California and took a rather nontraditional route into law. He said he wasn't a particularly good student in high school, attended a community college and transferred to UC Irvine, where he majored in Spanish literature and history.

During college, he established his own business as a chimney sweep. He saved up for about 6 to 7 months so he could travel to Argentina and try to figure out what he wanted to do for the rest of his life.



After he graduated, Roach took a year off for that trip and to study for the LSAT.

"I knew I didn't want to keep chimney sweeping," he said. "I always kind of envisioned having my own business. I liked the flexibility of having my own business versus working at McDonald's or something like that. I just applied myself, did really well at university and just looked at all my options and thought law school made the most sense. Although, my conception of law was a little different back then – I thought I would become a corporate lawyer or something like that and that I would be making a ton of money right out of law school."

In law school at UC Hastings, Roach found torts the most interesting, although he initially thought a tort was "some sort of pastry," he said. He had a law professor he truly admired and who really got him excited about torts and personal-injury law.

He graduated from UC Hastings in 2008, and no big law firms were really hiring, he said. So, he found his way into plaintiff work.

"It was kind of perfect for me," he said. "It's a little scrappy, it's David versus Goliath. It's nice to represent individuals and get to know them and try to make an impact in their lives by applying continuing education, learning from all the great trial lawyers, and just trying to maximize people's recovery when they put their fate in your hands. It's kind of cool."

The first year on his own

When it came time to hang up a shingle, Roach said he wasn't sure he would make it through the first year. He was engaged to be married, and it was a scary time to be opening his own firm. Luckily, he was able to take some "medium size" cases with him. Waiting for that first check to come in was terrifying, he admitted, but once he got his first settlement, it made it all worthwhile.

"It was something like \$30,000, and I got to keep my whole fee versus split it with someone else. That was eye-opening,"

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Getaway Spot: Joshua Tree

Go-To Music or Artist: Guy Clark

Recommended Reading: Shakespeare

Dream Job: Trial Attorney

Words to Live By: "He who has a why to live can bear almost any how." – Friedrich Nietzsche

he said. "But I also had overhead. I was really lucky because my mentor, Brian Lamb, gave me what was essentially a broom closet in his office to operate out of. And I never had to take him up on it, but he offered to defer my rent until my cases started coming in. Luckily, I was able to pay rent and keep the lights on but having friends like that and support within the community really enabled me to get on my own two feet. It's been a very enriching experience."

Trials: Start strong, use visuals

Roach's approach in trials is to try to win in opening. He gives the jury a preview of what the defense is going to say, then uses visual aids to show them it's a real injury – images such as an MRI scan or X-rays. Jury selection is something he still struggles with, he said. So, ever the pupil, he attends seminars on *voire dire*.

In preparation, Roach likes to spend time with his clients, in their homes, outside of the office, to figure out how their injury affects them. There are times he finds it's not the right case to take to trial because it's an injury that has healed. He values the human aspect of the plaintiffs he represents, having learned that through trial law books such as "Trial by Human," by Nicholas Rowley and Steven Halteman, and "Running With the Bulls," by Nicholas and Courtney Rowley.

Then, when it comes time for the trial, he turns to a more technical strategy.

"I do a lot of visuals, part of the Steve Brady school of show them what you're going to tell them, tell them and

then show them again," Roach said. "Steve Brady taught me that when you show someone a visual, it really sinks into their head a lot, maybe two-thirds more than when you just talk. So, there's some science behind that approach."

Applying the science

One particularly memorable case for which Roach didn't need much help visually was a binding arbitration against Farmers Insurance earlier this year. It involved a cyclist who was struck by a car making a U-turn right in front of him. Roach's client had a large gap in treatment, but there were no other injury-producing events, Roach said. He went on to have two back surgeries.

The defense was so frivolous, Roach said, that they concocted a phantom injury in between his bicycle accident and his second medical visit. The client had weakness in his legs to the point where he was starting to rely almost entirely on a wheelchair to be mobile.

"But they concocted this story that he had some other injury, although there was no documentation in the medical records," Roach said. "His initial symptoms were consistent with a lumbar-spine injury; he was initially seen by a general practitioner who didn't make the connection."

"It was a very interesting case because Farmers hired the worst expert ever ... who I've learned, through the plaintiff community, had been disciplined for giving frivolous expert opinion. So, it was really fun to bring all that out in cross-examination, to put all the evidence in front of the arbitrator, that there's no evidence of any subsequent injury. It's just tricks the insurance companies try to play, and maybe half the attorneys won't take a case to arbitration. They just concoct a frivolous defense and hope you go away. I found it very interesting they stuck to their guns all through the entire arbitration. My client was a very deserving guy, and in the end, I was able to get him some money. That was a nice victory."



Life outside of work

Roach and his wife have a 2-year-old daughter, and their life revolves around her, he said. He proceeded to quote Nietzsche: “He who has a why to live can bear just about any how.”

“My why is definitely my wife Elizabeth and my daughter Naomi,” he said. “So, I spend as much time as possible with them.”

Roach also is an amateur musician, a guitarist, and in fact is in a band with some colleagues. They don’t have a band

name yet, but they’re having fun, he said.

“It’s sort of rock with a little bit of a country twist,” Roach said. “These are all folks I worked with at the Dolan firm.”

Though he still considers himself a student of the law, Roach has enough experience to now offer others some wisdom. He could not emphasize enough the value of having a role model to emulate.

“Try to find a mentor that has everything that you want, and try to formulate your goals,” Roach said. “If you can

visualize what you want in the future, it’s much easier to take the baby steps to get there. For me, having a guy like Bryan Lamb has really made all the difference in my career. Because you don’t know what you don’t know when you’re a young lawyer. Keep learning, keep evolving.”

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