



Profile: Josh White

Trial lawyer takes a teamwork approach to ‘doing good for people’

By **STEPHEN ELLISON**

The concept of teamwork comes natural to Josh White. He learned it early in life, and he’s continued to embrace it as a young professional. To this day, it plays a huge part in his success as a seasoned plaintiffs’ personal injury attorney.

For White and his partners with San Francisco-based Altair Law, teamwork is not a mere lip-service philosophy but instead, a daily, fundamental part of their practice.

“This was one of the reasons why we wanted to break away from our former firms and create Altair,” he said. “We all had a joint vision that we didn’t want to be siloed in our practices. We want to really work together collaboratively. And I feel like in a lot of firms that I’ve been in – and the other partners have felt it as well – it’s hard to do that. You gravitate toward being siloed just because of the nature of the work. So, we always want to use the team model.

“Anytime we’re going to trial, there will be, for the most part, two partners on a case. White explained that the two partners and a firm associate will be the trial team. “I think trial can be daunting, trial can be grinding, trial can be terrifying. The stress level gets high, but I think because we always have a team approach, it helps lessen the workload on one partner. I think it adds to the quality of the trial because there’s different perspectives. And then, of course, the work is shared.”

Partners left other prominent firms

The partners at Altair boast decades of collective experience from a couple of the biggest and best firms in the Bay Area. White and current Altair partner Kevin Morrison came from partnerships at Jones Clifford, and the other three – Jeremy



White

Cloyd, Andje Medina and Craig Peters – were leading attorneys at The Veon Firm.

Together at Altair, the team has garnered several seven- and eight-figure awards for their clients, most of whom have suffered severe or catastrophic

injuries or have lost a family member in wrongful death incidents. The firm makes it a point to emphasize its advocacy for “the underdog,” and White doubled down on that aspect when discussing why he chose a career in law.

“Growing up, I didn’t know any lawyers. There are no lawyers in my family. The practice of law was something completely new to me,” he said. “I mean, even in my circle of friends, I didn’t know any lawyers. So, this was like uncharted territory. I think one of the big drivers was just knowing that lawyers can be extremely impactful in somebody’s life. But also (they have) the ability to right a wrong, whatever field that’s in. It appealed to me – to my sense of right and wrong.”

Indeed, while White never had a family member or friend in law as an influence, he did witness firsthand as a younger adult how the law could have both positive and negative effects on an individual. The person in question is his mother, who was a teen recording artist with a hit song in the 1960s. At age 15, Kathy Young released her rendition of “A Thousand Stars” in 1960, and the song made it all the way to No. 3 on the Billboard Hot 100 and No. 6 on the R&B Chart.

But, like many artists during that era, White’s mother got into a bad recording

deal, he said. With her mother serving as her agent, Young signed a contract in which she did not own the masters for her music. Ultimately, the record label kept a large portion of the profits earned from that hit song and Young’s other recordings. Later in life, she hired an attorney who was able to get her masters back, White said.

“I thought that was really amazing because I grew up hearing my mom tell me stories ... about the artists that she was performing with and the circles she ran in, those kinds of stories, and those were really meaningful to me,” White recalled. “But it’s always seemed so tragic to me that it was a part of her life she never profited off in any way, you know, monetarily. It was just about the experience. So, the fact that she was able to kind of get justice, if you will, through the law, that had a big impact on me. And that was happening right around the time that I decided to go to law school.”

Farm to [conference] table

White was born in Lindsay, California, and raised in Strathmore, two small towns in the state’s Central Valley between Fresno and Bakersfield. His family was third-generation farmers, growing oranges and olives. As a child, his father told a lot of stories about his “previous life” as a physical therapist for a large orthopedics group in downtown Los Angeles, working with professional athletes on the Dodgers and Lakers.

Naturally, when it came time for the young White to consider what he wanted to do in life, he gravitated toward following in his dad’s footsteps as a physical therapist.

“Growing up, it always struck me as so cool the work he did with athletes,” he said. “I played sports all through my childhood, but nobody wanted a 5-foot-11 shooting guard who couldn’t shoot, so I knew sports weren’t for me. But that



part of it, you know, being around athletes, still really appealed to me. So, I wanted to get into physical therapy.

“When I got into college, I quickly realized that maybe his dream wasn’t mine anymore, and I tried to find my way, like a lot of people,” White continued. “I stuck with my major, got the degree in exercise and movement science. But I kind of found a different path. It took me some time to do that out of college because I just wasn’t sure what I wanted to do with my life. I just knew I wanted something with a higher purpose.”

After earning that bachelor’s degree at University of Oregon and then seeing the travesty of what his mother endured in the music business, White took a long, hard look at law school with a keen focus on intellectual property law. Some years later – it wasn’t an immediate decision – he went a short distance north to Willamette University College of Law in Portland with a plan to become an IP lawyer. But, much like his early years at Oregon, he again had a change of heart.

“I went to school with a plan in mind and a practice area or a major that I wanted to pursue, and during law school, I realized maybe that’s also not for me,” White said. “Looking back, I probably should have done a little more digging, you know, asked around a little bit, shadowed somebody. But IP law, because of my mom’s experience, seemed like a fit.”

White said he chose Oregon for its beautiful evergreen landscape, its fair distance from the brown, dusty orchards of Central California and its top-rated physical therapy program. Plus, it offered everything in terms of campus life and outdoor activities, he said.

It became the place where he and his wife met. Eventually, they returned together to her hometown in the Bay Area. “She’s, a fourth-generation San Franciscan, and we found our way back here,” White said. “She always knew she was coming back, and I didn’t know that. But, when I came here, I was like, ‘Okay, I get it now. I see why you want to live in this place.’”

REDIRECT:

Getaway Spot: Anywhere on Mt. Tam on my bike

Go-To Music or Artist: Wu-Tang Clan

Recommended Reading: Anything by Erik Larson

Dream Job: I have it. (But, in another life, point guard for the Lakers)

Words to Live By: “Life isn’t about finding yourself. Life is about creating yourself.” – George Bernard Shaw

Defensive efforts

Out of law school, White retained a business mindset and went to work for a firm where he did insurance defense and other financial cases on the defense side. He believes philosophically he’d always been a bit more business oriented, and even though he said one could call him a “true believer” on the plaintiff side, it doesn’t necessarily mean he hates corporations or businesses. Not all corporations are villainous, and most are a vital part of society, he said. And sometimes those corporations need a defense too.

“So, I thought I’d try my hand at that and quickly realized that the defense world wasn’t for me,” he said. “I say quickly; I was in it for several years. But you chart a course, and you find where you’re going, and that doesn’t happen overnight. I tried a lot of it, and it was like no shoe fit. So, I tried to find a path towards the plaintiffs’ bar.”

Thanks to a college buddy and veteran plaintiffs’ attorney Jeff Smith, who told him some of the ins and outs of the practice and connected with Kevin Morrison, White found that path and started with Jones Clifford as an associate. He said it was the best decision he ever made.

Now that he has some years and cases under his belt on the plaintiffs’ bar, White said one of his next goals is to qualify for the American Board of Trial Advocates, perhaps the most prestigious association in the trial law profession. Two of his colleagues, Peters and Morrison, are ABOTA members, and he and his other partners would love nothing more than to join them.

“Getting into ABOTA, you’ve got to have a number of trials. But you also have to meet all of their requirements for civility and professionalism too,” White said. “It’s tough. I’ve been at Altair six years now. We’ve gone to trial four times. I think as you work harder and you build a reputation for doing good work, you start to get better cases. Those better cases are less likely to go to trial because they’re stronger cases. The defense recognizes when you’ve got a strong case, and sometimes that case won’t go to trial because it is such a good case.”

A ‘forever’ case

One case in particular that is burned in White’s memory is representing the victims of the February 2017 mass shooting at the UPS hub in San Francisco, where a driver walked into a morning meeting and opened fire on his co-workers. Jimmy Lam killed three and then turned the gun on himself. Two others were shot and survived, and still others were injured while running for their lives, White said.

Lam walked through and set off a metal detector and was not stopped, even though security personnel were onsite. In an all-hands-on-deck case, White and his partners successfully resolved the claims of 56 victims of the mass shooting, which included family members. The precise amount awarded remains confidential.

“When I got sworn in after having passed the bar, I remember calling my mom and just saying, ‘I feel like this is not just a job; it’s a profession. And I feel so lucky. I’m going to do good for people.’ That’s what I wanted to do,” White said. “The UPS case, to me, is one example of that. I mean, it’s a case where people lost their lives. I never thought that I would have a case where I represented anybody who had been murdered; I just didn’t see that in my future. Getting an opportunity to represent those people, knowing what they went through as families and the impact that you could have for them ... It was a brutal litigation. It was four years, over 220 depositions, through COVID.



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The sense of responsibility that we had for that case, for the people that we were representing, and the impact that they had on us throughout the litigation – that’s a case that’ll be with me forever.”

When he’s not in court or in the office, White enjoys bicycling, saying it’s a great way to “hit the reset button.” He also loves spending time with his wife and

two teen daughters, including traveling abroad when time allows. They recently took “an amazing trip” to Spain and Portugal, he said.

In terms of advice, White said he would tell the next generation of lawyers there’s no substitute for hard work and civility. “I think a lot of times in our profession, people think they need to be zealous. Advocacy becomes kind of

cutthroat,” he said. “But in the long run, I just don’t think that works out well. I think you develop a bad reputation, and it starts to hurt you. So, it sounds cliché, but work hard, be kind to people, and good things will happen.”

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