

Rising Stars of the Bar

by MO Lawyers Media Staff

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David Bell of Kansas City left behind a big firm paycheck to be a public defender because he felt passionate about help the underdog.

Charles "Chip" Gentry was given the reins of a Jefferson City-based law firm when he was 32, and two years later he officially was made the managing partner at the firm. Now he leads them in growing a niche practice around the country.

Megan Phillips turned down a career track with a silk-stocking law firm to fill a void of leadership for women in the state bar. Her leadership in St. Louis has raised awareness of gender issues in law firms and helped get women on the judicial commission responsible for choosing judges.

All three, under age 40, have made remarkable achievements as lawyers, and they are among 16 chosen as our Up & Coming Lawyers for 2006.

The group, the largest selected over the last nine years of the award, hail from across the state - Kansas City, Columbia, Jefferson City, Poplar Bluff, St. Peters and St. Louis. Some are practicing in big firms, others, like Bell and prosecutor Amy Fite, work for the state.

But these 16 possessed something extra to distinguish them as rising members of the bar.

What we searched for

We looked for lawyers who dedicate themselves to a vocation, not merely a job. We wanted those who take pride in helping their clients and who believe being a lawyer means more than winning a big verdict or writing a killer contract. It also means contributing to the legal profession and making their communities better places to live.

The lawyer who reaches outside of the profession to help through community service or some significant work done to further the ideals of justice and the law - that is the lawyer we wanted to spotlight.

We found unique lawyers like Kansas City attorney Curt Chase, who is considered an expert in his practice area of health law; Thomas Fagan of St. Louis, who raises the bar on client satisfaction, viewing every file on his desk as the most important; Lon Walters in Kansas City, who recently won a \$13.3 million wrongful death verdict; and Richard Paul, whose competitive spirit is helping him grow a thriving class-action litigation practice in Kansas City.

But what we found truly impressive, perhaps even more than their considerable achievements at these early stages of their careers, were their motivations for wanting to

be lawyers, and the passion they possess in pursuit of their ideals.

Amy Fite of St. Louis recalled witnessing a mother in a parking lot swinging a belt at her child. The woman's other child was bruised all over his body. She called the police and state agencies to follow up on the incident, but because of legal technicalities, the state was unable to intervene to help the children.

Not only did Fite want to define the law, but she wanted to be the one using it.

That's why she became a lawyer and has spent a considerable part of her career prosecuting crimes involving rape, abuse and child molestation.

Scott Robbins of Poplar Bluff saw that his community was faced with contaminated water from raw sewage seeping up from the ground. He petitioned the circuit court, then obtained voter approval for creating a sewer district and passage of a bond issue to finance the system. His work created safe drinking water for thousands of residents in southeast Missouri.

Then there is Michael Williams, an employment defense attorney in Kansas City, who has dedicated himself to improving the work environment by helping with diversity initiatives and setting policies to prevent workplace discrimination.

"Winning and losing isn't always about the amount awarded but about how your actions will affect the future and help others move forward," Williams said.

A bumpy road to get here

The road for these lawyers to get to their level at this early stage has not always been easy. They all had their war stories.

Randall Thompson said his first trial started out as a disaster. The judge lambasted him, calling him the worst attorney he had ever seen. Thompson went on to win the case and later ran into the judge in public. You'll have to read his story on page 14 to find out what was said.

What he learned from that adversity early on was never to get too down, or too high.

The road to being a lawyer for Lon Walters of Kansas City was a long one. He may have given up on farming life in a town of 500, but he has clung to the agrarian values of persistence and purpose. Walters always wanted to be a lawyer. Unable to pay for law school, he took a job for four years as a paralegal, until he saved enough money to go. Today he leads his own law firm with a growing personal injury practice.

Others have switched practice areas to get where they are happy today. Mike Rader began as a prosecutor, but now has started up his own successful plaintiffs' practice.

Many of the lawyers say they have been successful mostly for one reason: a strong mentor at some stage of their career.

For Robert Buckley of Colombia, that mentorship started with his father, an attorney, conducting trial at the dinner table and using his wife and kids as a mock jury to test his case. He credits several lawyers with whom he has worked that have given him a chance to try cases. Read what he has to say for young lawyers starting a practice, page 15.

How we chose

Missouri Lawyers received a record number of nominations this year. The 16 winners were chosen with the help of a selection committee of three attorneys from different regions of the state: Chris Wright of Joplin, Elle Sullivant of Independence and Diane Robben of St. Louis. Special thanks goes out to these three attorneys, past Up & Coming Lawyers themselves, who were more than willing to participate in what continues to be an important recognition and benchmark for Missouri lawyers. Their help made the selection process a lot easier.

The committee was charged with selecting lawyers that had dedicated themselves to the legal profession and somehow merited recognition - whether for noteworthy cases, unique practice areas, significant pro bono work, interesting community or bar-association efforts. We wanted candidates from a variety of work areas and types of practices: judges, prosecutors, public defenders, in-house counsel, and large and small firms. The typical candidate would stand out for multiple reason and achievements.

Candidates also would likely have reached outside of their profession in some way to help through community service or some significant work done to further the ideals of justice and the law. All of our finalists found time to give back to their community, including sitting on boards, working for charitable groups like Big Brothers Big Sisters and educational programs, church involvement and bar leadership.

To all 16, we say congratulation. Take a look inside starting on page 12 and meet these Up and Coming lawyers.

Up & Coming Lawyers 2006 (387603)

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By providing safe drinking water and helping to organize a rural sewer district, Scott Robbins has improved the health and quality of life for thousands of people in southeast Missouri.

Robbins was instrumental in creating the Pike Creek Common Sewer District in Butler County, which was one of the first purely rural sewer districts in the state. The process included petitioning the circuit court, getting voter approval for the creation of the district, and passage of a bond issue to finance the system.

“Pike Creek stands out because it was a controversial issue,” Robbins said. “It had strong support and strong opposition. It was strongly debated whether Poplar Bluff should provide the sewer or whether a sewer district should be formed.”

His work on Pike Creek helped to reduce exposed raw sewage that was seeping up through the ground. Beyond the certain aesthetic improvements, the formation of the sewer district increased the marketability of homes in the area.

Residents of New Madrid have also benefitted from the work of Robbins, where he helped to ensure they had safe drinking water.

In 2001, the Missouri Department of Natural Resources found high levels of MTBE contamination in the drinking water supply due to leaking underground gasoline tanks located by a water well.

With the help of engineers, the Department of Natural Resources, and the community development block grant program, Robbins was able to find the district a new water supply and secure state grants. He also negotiated settlements with the companies responsible for the leaky storage tanks.

“Seeing the improvement in peoples’ lives was really rewarding,” Robbins said. “I definitely enjoy my work.”

His work with sewer district led to Robbins forming the Missouri Association of Sewer Districts, an organization active in drafting and advocating legislation that benefits sewer districts.

Besides his work with rural water and sewer systems, Robbins is the chair of his church’s building committee and has successfully seen the completion of Phase I of a multi-phase, \$4.5 million dollar relocation project. He has been active with the Missouri Bar, participating in the leadership academy where he helped to produce an educational video aimed at high school students that teaches the importance of jury service.

While Robbins has been in Poplar Bluff for more than 10 years, he grew up in Kearney, MO., and ended up in southeast Missouri after he saw an opening at the firm. He was familiar with the area because as a child he would travel with his father, who was employed by Russell Stover, to the plant in Poplar Bluff where heart-shaped candy boxes were produced.

“I had fond memories of the town so when I saw an ad during law school for employment there, I applied and was hired,” Robbins said. “It turned out to be a great choice.”

Name: Scott Robbins

Education: Wesleyan University, B.A., 1993; University of Colombia, J.D., 1996

Experience: Kennedy, Kennedy & Robbins, 1996 - Present. Member since 2000.