

Davis Award Winner Jason St. Julien on the Importance of Connection

BY HALEY HEMEN

Each year, Davis Graham & Stubbs LLP joins the Denver Bar Foundation and Davis Family to sponsor the Richard Marden Davis Award. The award is presented to a Denver lawyer under the age of 40 who “so combines excellence as a lawyer with creative civic, cultural, educational, and charitable leadership as to best exemplify the character and promise of Richard Marden Davis at that stage in his career.” The CBA is proud to spotlight this year’s Davis Award winner, Jason St. Julien.

For Jason St. Julien, connection is essential. Most recently, the pandemic has brought this into sharp focus. “As much as we may want to hide it, we are social beings,” he muses. “Given that is the case, we have no idea how a simple smile, hug, or acknowledgment can alter someone’s mood or life. I remember riding my bike during the lockdown begging and praying that I would see someone walking so I could just say ‘hello’ and hear them say ‘hello’ back.”

The pandemic was also the genesis of St. Julien’s *Denver Post* op-ed about his experience of being Black in this world at this moment,¹ when so many Black and brown people have to carefully calibrate a performance of self in public to survive the mundane in a culture that’s hostile to their very being. “The pandemic forced me to come to grips with the fact that no one is coming to save me or ‘us’ in general. The fact that I want life to be some way other than it is, is for me to deal with. In order to do that, I continually ask myself, ‘Right now, in this moment, what actions are you taking that are consistent with what you are committed to?’ That can be a very confronting question to ask yourself. At times, I find that my answer is ‘nothing.’ Then I have to take responsibility for how my life is going—rather than blame the



pandemic or someone else—and start taking actions to create the life I want to live.”

In his *Denver Post* op-ed, St. Julien calls on each of us to “[t]olerate nothing. Acquiesce to nothing. Be fierce. Be bold. Be brave . . .” in standing up to instances of racism that we witness. “That is how you make the difference.”

It’s a powerful belief to hold, that each person has such a massive impact in this life, but it’s

something he has seen play out in his life, as much as it has empowered him to be the kind of man who makes things happen.

From Teacher to Prosecutor

A native of St. Martinville, Louisiana, St. Julien arrived in Denver nine years ago because of a series of important connections. St. Julien originally was a teacher. He taught seventh grade Texas history and reading (and coached football and basketball) at Pearland Junior High South in Pearland, Texas. In 2007, he started considering graduate school (“probably an MBA or a PhD in psychology”), when his cousin Mark Chretien, a patent attorney at Greenberg Traurig in Houston, asked him if he’d ever considered law school. In the end, St. Julien reasoned that law school would open more doors for him than a PhD in psychology and, as he reluctantly conceded, provide a better economic outlook. So he walked away from the education field that he loved and enrolled in law school at Louisiana State University.

During his 2L year in law school, St. Julien interned with Chief Judge Ralph E. Tyson of the US District Court for the Middle District of Louisiana in Baton Rouge. Judge Tyson offered him a clerkship when he graduated. However, Judge Tyson passed away from cancer just before St. Julien took the bar exam. “In him, I lost a mentor and friend.”

St. Julien then began cold calling federal judges across the nation, telling them his story and asking if they had any openings for a law clerk. When everyone else was saying no, Judge Mary Ann Vial Lemmon in the US District Court for the Eastern District of Louisiana in New Orleans said yes.

“While working in New Orleans, my trial advocacy coach at Louisiana State University, Jude Bourque, reached out to Judge Alfred Harrell in Denver: they teach together for NITA, the National Institute for Trial Advocacy. He told my story to Judge Harrell, and Judge Harrell contacted Judge Wiley Y. Daniel, then chief judge of the US District Court for the District of Colorado. I spoke with Judge Daniel while he was on a break during a jury trial, and we promised to stay in touch. In 2011, Judge Daniel spoke at a probation conference in New Orleans. We met

up for breakfast and within 30 seconds it was like I was talking to my uncle,” St. Julien says.

“Long story short, Judge Daniel offered me a clerkship position. I had never been to Denver before and I knew no one in Denver except Judge Daniel. I figured that this door was opening because there were life lessons that I needed to master, and I could only master them in Denver. I also figured there were people I needed to meet that I could only meet in Denver and things I needed to do that I could only do in Denver. I surrendered to that. Now my world is a bigger place because of my nine years in Denver.”

Following time spent as a federal law clerk, St. Julien became a federal criminal prosecutor. “It was the highest honor to make my appearance in federal court and say, ‘Jason St. Julien for the United States.’ My heart would skip a beat every time I would say that—it still does when I think about it today. I always knew at the end of the day that I had my hand on the pulse of something greater than myself: I was representing the United States and my job was to keep its citizens safe.”

A Time of Personal Growth

During his years as a federal prosecutor, St. Julien and his friend Earl Johnson created the At Last! Project, which would see them leading four sessions of a three-hour program at a federal prison. It shaped his perspective in important ways. “The program was three parts. The first was a conversation about listening—we asked the participants to consider that we rarely, almost never, actually listen to others. The second part was a conversation about being related and connected to everyone we interact with because we are all human and have similar concerns—they just show up differently based on our life experiences. The third part was an exercise called the ‘Be With’ exercise. Each participant has a partner, and they stand a couple feet from each other and just look at each other in silence for several minutes.

“During the first presentation we facilitated, we had a break after the first conversation. I told Earl that for the first time I really let myself hear and listen to the participants’ stories. What I did not know was that as a prosecutor, I had drawn a line and prevented myself from ‘walking in their shoes.’ To be clear, I listened and read



Top: St. Julien, joined by Paul Chan and Justice Richard Gabriel, at the Davis Award Dinner on February 3.

Right: Accepting the 2021 Richard Marden Davis Award.

about defendants’ backgrounds, but I always had a wall up.

“What I experienced during the first presentation was mind-boggling. For the first time, I really, I mean really, saw that the participants in front of me could have been my dad, my brother, my uncle, or my friend. In fact, *every one* of the participants is someone’s son, dad, uncle, or friend. I felt an instant and profound connection to their human-ness. I saw them as human beings, just like me, dealing with life, just like me. When I realized this, I actually cried in front of them.”

After such an experience, it’s no surprise that his customary advice for new lawyers is to “connect with people.” (He doesn’t like the word “networking.”) He advises, “Get to know people you work with. Your interpersonal relationships, along with the trust and respect you earn, is what will carry you.”

St. Julien has since moved on from his role as a federal prosecutor. His new position is lead counsel of Community Trust at Airbnb. “I



have never worked for a business per se. Here I am, not only learning a new position, in house counsel, but also learning about business so I can properly advise our internal clients. The learning curve is exponentially steep, and with that comes the humbling experience of making mistakes and having to admit I do not know certain things. That said, I work with amazing colleagues. I have never experienced the diversity—however you choose to define it—that I have at Airbnb. This new challenge has been the catalyst for significant personal growth in the past seven months.”



St. Julien posing outside his junior college (Frank Phillips College in Borger, Texas) while on a summer motorcycle trip with his dad.

Getting Schooled by Middle Schoolers

There are certain skills from St. Julien's teaching days that have served him well in his law career, the biggest being communication. "In any relationship, communication is paramount. Especially when you are teaching seventh graders. I couldn't get frustrated at students for not following directions or an assignment when I did not properly communicate the assignment with absolute precision. I came at it from the place that I am the teacher, and the buck stops with me. Similarly, as a lawyer, it is my responsibility to communicate clearly. If a request is not executed by design, that is on me because I was not clear."

The challenges inherent in teaching middle schoolers—a notoriously tough audience—also helped St. Julien hone his public speaking skills. "These young people are so much more intuitive

and intelligent than we ever give them credit for. *They will see through you* in a nanosecond if you are not being real with them. I had to be quick on my feet. I had to demonstrate patience and leadership, even when I was not necessarily sure how a lesson would pan out."

Bookstores and Motorbikes

When not on the clock, St. Julien continues working to make connections with others on important topics, giving regular presentations to groups about race and race relations in the community. He also has a wide range of interests to keep him busy, from reading ("Bookstores are like hallowed ground for me. There is so much knowledge and wisdom in all the books in a bookstore. I constantly have to tell myself to only buy one book at a time."), to the symphony ("I am very thankful that the

Colorado Symphony is back performing live. I usually go to two performances a month during the season."), to going down the road on his Harley-Davidson Road King motorcycle when the weather is good (after getting stuck in an epic rain and hailstorm this past July, "guess who constantly checks the weather now?").

Of course, it doesn't take a meteorologist to see there are plenty of sunny days ahead for this year's Davis Award winner. The CBA congratulates Jason St. Julien on his outstanding achievement. 

NOTE

1. St. Julien, "The unrelenting, frustratingly delicate balancing act of being black," *Den. Post* (June 18, 2020), <https://www.denverpost.com/2020/06/18/jason-st-julien-the-unrelenting-frustratingly-delicate-balancing-act-of-being-black>.