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They've Got Next: the 40 under 40

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John Pitts

Age: 40

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Practice Area: Mergers
& Acquisitions

Title: Partner

Location: Houston

Law School: Georgetown
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KIRKLAND & ELLIS LLP

John Pitts of Kirkland & Ellis

By Lisa Helem and Kibkabe Araya | July 28, 2022

Please describe two of your most substantial, recent wins in practice.

I represented a consortium led by KKR and GIP in the approximately \$15 billion take-private of CyrusOne Inc., a premier global data center real estate investment trust. Successfully closing this transaction required seamless cross-border coordination in numerous foreign jurisdictions, an extensive post-signing syndication effort that included multiple sovereign wealth funds, and a unique hybrid infrastructure/real estate financing structure.

I also represented KKR in a yearlong series of transactions creating one of the largest fixed-based operator networks in the world, beginning with the \$4.475 billion acquisition of Atlantic Aviation from Macquarie Infrastructure Corp. I then advised Atlantic Aviation in the acquisition of the Lynx FBO Network from The Sterling Group before merging Atlantic Aviation and KSL-owned Ross Aviation. To achieve this, our team handled multiple acquisition transactions simultaneously, including regulatory clearance efforts with municipal, state, and federal stakeholders.

What is the most important lesson you learned as a first-year attorney and how does it inform your practice today?

Trust is the bedrock of a successful transactional practice and building trust begins the day you start as a first-year associate. A successful associate is counted on to execute the seemingly small tasks, such as proofing documents, researching case law, and managing work streams across practice groups, that ultimately make a large collective contribution to a client relationship.

Once a first-year associate establishes trust with partners (and perhaps more importantly senior associates) by independently succeeding at these tasks, attractive staffing opportunities naturally follow and ultimately the establishment of the key mentoring relationships that are so critical to a junior attorney's long-term career development. This ethos of trust learned as a first-year later evolves into the cornerstone of good client development and client management. There is complete alignment between the strength of a client relationship and the degree to which the client trusts their advisers to execute their most important transactions, with respect to both the small tasks and the most important.

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John Pitts is a founding partner of his firm's first Texas office, in Houston. A recipient of the Bronze Star Medal for his service as a platoon leader in Operation Iraqi Freedom, he sits on the board of directors for Team Rubicon, an international nongovernmental organization specializing in mobilizing veterans for disaster response.

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How do you define success in your practice?

Success is an email or text from a client to the effect of "We could not have done this without K&E." That simple communication means our services were a value-add proposition, and we have subsequently strengthened the client relationship. We seek to be an integral part of our client's deal team and achieve that goal by deploying a Kirkland team of true subject matter experts who seamlessly cooperate to achieve our client's objectives. Core to that strategy is the diminishment of the individual lawyer's importance in exchange for deepening the relationship by ensuring the client's entire "A-Team" is fully engaged for each assignment. As such, personal success in my practice means my entire team is indispensable to the client and we (together) are "go-to" counsel for their most important transactions.

What are you most proud of as a lawyer?

I am most proud of building a growing and dynamic business in Texas that employs 362 attorneys and an additional 163 support personnel. It is absolutely possible to be both a lawyer and an entrepreneur and growing in both roles since the opening of Kirkland's Houston office has been the most satisfying (and fun!) period of my career. We have built our business around a young and motivated team of attorneys who are willing to take risks and be creative in our approach to client development.

In particular, the scale and growth of our business in Texas has resulted in internal share partnership promotions since our founding in 2014. I am exceptionally proud that I played a role in building a business that has provided this incredible opportunity to younger lawyers. It is immensely satisfying to see associates I mentored and trained be promoted to partnership and take ownership of our next phase of growth. I am extremely confident and proud that Kirkland is home to, without a doubt, the smartest and most capable young attorneys in Texas.

Who is your greatest mentor in the law and what have they taught you?

Andy Calder, the leader of our Texas practice, took me under his wing as a first year and we work closely together as partners to this day. My development as a lawyer is in great part owed to Andy's yearslong investment in my career, beginning with late nights honing technical drafting skills and later learning negotiation tactics by sitting side by side "in the room." The most valuable lesson I learned from Andy is to approach transactional work by first understanding the client's goals and then applying that understanding to achieve commercial outcomes. I came to appreciate early on that great lawyers do not argue to win as many points as possible but instead partner with clients to shape transactions that lock in key value points while understanding and accommodating the counterparty's priorities. If a lawyer is able to do both well, a transaction is highly likely to be successful.

Just for fun, tell us your two favorite songs on your summer music playlist.

SOJA - "Rest of My Life": The reggae beats take me away to summer vacations with close friends and playing Wiffle ball and watching fireworks at the beach with my kids. As the song says, "If I could spend the rest of my life with my people, I would do it over and over again."

Rüfüs du Sol - "Next to Me": Run (don't walk) to see Rüfüs du Sol in concert. This was my first live show since Covid, and it was inspiring, beautiful, and so much fun. "Next to Me" is one of my favorites, but I have the whole album on constant repeat this summer.