

TEXAS LAWYER

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GREG MABLY

PROFESSIONAL EXCELLENCE 2018

TEXAS LAWYER IS PROUD TO PROFILE THE HONOREES OF our 2018 Professional Excellence Awards. Our profiles include our Lifetime Achievers, our finalists for Attorney of the Year, and our Lawyers on the Rise. New for this year, we are also recognizing individuals in the categories of Most Effective Dealmakers, Best Mentors, and Top Woman in IP. In addition, we have included our Litigation Department of the Year honorees for midsize and small firms, and our Legal Department of the Year.

The profiles for some of these categories are done in a Q&A format, which we think you will find an informative read. They have also been edited for style and length.

We define all these lawyers as ones who have made their mark on the legal profession in the Lone Star State. All of the honorees have had, and continue to have, extraordinary careers. The bottom line: They are all impact players in the Texas legal community.

For us, the most important takeaway from this process is not that Texas lawyers consistently do great work, but that the definition of that great work in the context of the legal profession seems to be boundless. It can mean achieving a multimillion-dollar result for a personal injury plaintiff or saving millions of dollars in litigation expenses for a corporate client. But it can also mean helping

companies grow and thrive, stamping out political corruption, mentoring young lawyers, making new laws and getting justice for the wrongfully accused or convicted, among so many other things.

Our Lawyers on the Rise honors Texas' most promising lawyers under the age of 40. These lawyers have wielded influence and are excelling in their practice areas in the Lone Star State. They are innovators, developers of unique practice niches, have strong leadership qualities, and have committed themselves to pro bono, charitable and professional volunteer work.

Selecting the three finalists for our Attorney of the Year Award was as daunting an undertaking as ever, as we again set out to honor the lawyer who had the most significant impact on the Texas legal community this past year.

We profile the three finalists in this issue and the winner of Attorney of the Year will be announced at the Professional Excellence Awards reception at the Belo Mansion in Dallas on Sept. 19.

A huge thanks to everyone who sent in submissions for these awards. We were thrilled at the response and enjoyed reading about all the great work being done by Texas lawyers. We are always astounded at the level of lawyer talent we have here in the Lone Star State. ■



PARTNER

Robert S. Safi

Experience:

Susman Godfrey, 2006–present
 Hon. Vaughan Walker, then-Chief
 Judge, U.S. District Court, Northern
 District of California, 2005–2006

Education:

University of Texas School of Law, 2005
 University of Texas at Austin, 2002

What drew you to a career in law?

Although I come from a family of lawyers, and was nudged in the direction of law from a young age, law was not my first choice. Contrarian by nature, I resisted that for years. In college (UT Austin), I was drawn down a different path: house and techno music. I put most of my energy into becoming a working DJ while moonlighting as a student. I had a successful run performing and promoting events at

clubs and larger venues, and loved every minute of it. But that existence came at the expense of my college education; I graduated by the skin of my teeth.

I realized that, long term, the life of a DJ was not for me. And, I wanted a second chance academically. Law school felt right. The research for my undergraduate thesis included reading a bunch of U.S. Supreme Court opinions, and that study of the legal process had fascinated me. By providence, I was admitted to The University of Texas School of Law, and my awesome experience at that institution sealed my fate of becoming a trial lawyer.

Have you set a specific goal that you want to achieve in the next year?

Winning a blockbuster jury verdict for my client Mirada Energy in its dispute with Oasis Petroleum.

What has been your proudest career moment and your biggest hurdle?

As a young lawyer, my proudest career moment was my first jury verdict. I second-chaired Steve Susman. The legendary David Beck was on the other side. Even so,

Susman let me give the opening and cross-examine witnesses. My presentation had more passion than polish, but we won, and afterward all the jurors who responded to our post-verdict questionnaire said I was as effective as Susman. That experience taught me I could do just fine as a trial lawyer by trusting my instincts and being myself. Coming to that realization early in my career was a real blessing.

Recently, my proudest career moment was winning a Tenth Circuit judgment of affirmance in *Spring Creek Exploration & Production Company et al. v. Hess Bakken Investments II, LLC et al.* It was the first complex, nine-figure case that I took from filing to final judgment as leader of the trial team. Don't get me wrong: It's always a team effort, and Susman Godfrey assembles dynamite trial teams. But the confidence that comes from making—when the buck stops with you—myriad strategic decisions and judgment calls over the life of a tough case and seeing that culminate in victory—there's no substitute for that in a young litigator's professional development.

My biggest hurdle has been myself. Success in law school has a way of overinflating the egos of those who let it, as I did. Coming to grips with the fact that I'm not always right, and that my way isn't always the best way—that took some time for me, and there was plenty of humiliation along the way.

Where do you fit on a 1-10 work-life balance scale with 10 being nirvana? Please explain.

8. Susman Godfrey partners have the freedom to find the work-life balance that suits them and their families. That flexibility has allowed me to keep my docket of active matters to just a handful at any given time so that I can immerse myself in each one while still having time for family and fun. Technology also helps. Going paperless and having everything with me at all times on my iPad helps me better allocate time among my clients and my family. Sure, I could work longer hours and make more money. But I get to spend time with my wife and young daughter most every morning, evening, and weekend. I wouldn't trade that for anything, and am blessed to work at a firm that lets me to make that choice.

What is the top quality that you've used to succeed in the profession?

Not being satisfied with "good enough."

Who is your favorite mentor and why?

I have two.

My father, S. Anthony Safi: Dad instilled strong writing fundamentals by mercilessly taking a red pen to my work when I was still just a kid. I still count on him for wise, spot-on counsel. Whether it's a matter of strategy or ethics, or even just a question of law, his compass always points me in the right direction.

My law partner, Geoffrey L. Harrison: Geoff is a consummate trial lawyer who advocates as he lives—with flair. He holds himself to a standard of excellence in a way that inspires others to do the same, all while being himself and having fun. He's a wonderful role model, and usually the first "senior" lawyer at the firm I go to for guidance. In his office, you can count on good advice and a good laugh.

What's the best advice anyone has ever given you?

Do right and risk the consequences.

What trends are you observing in the profession that you're excited about?

Diversity: There are plenty of reasons the profession should make this a priority. At Susman Godfrey, increasing the diversity of our lawyers has enriched the community of the firm and made it a more interesting place to practice law.

Technology: The more mundanity that technology can drive out of the practice, the happier we'll all be. I'm not worried about a robot replacing me anytime soon.

What is the greatest challenge you see for the legal profession?

The vanishing trial, especially the vanishing civil jury trial. It is common knowledge that the percentage of civil disputes that are resolved by juries is declining. Our firm founder, Steve Susman, has taken great strides in exploring this trend and how, ultimately, we can protect the Seventh Amendment right to a jury trial in civil cases. His work through The Civil Jury Project at NYU School of Law is important both to the legal profession and our democratic society as a whole.