

LAWDRAGON

Beck Redden: The Houston Trial Powerhouse Turns Its Eyes to A New Generation



Matthew Whitley, Alistair B. Dawson, Russell Post, Fields Alexander and Mary Kate Raffetto. Photo by Felix Sanchez.

By Emily Jackoway and Alison Preece

The attorneys at Beck Redden are authorities on a comprehensive array of litigation practices. The firm's lawyers practice on both sides of the V, in areas including energy, commercial, intellectual property, legal malpractice defense, products liability, class action and multi-district litigation – and they are standouts in appellate work, as well. On the plaintiffs' side, the firm recently stepped in as trial counsel in New York District Court to resolve a nine-year, billion-dollar securities fraud class action against tech company BlackBerry.

In the firm's appellate practice, they began 2024 with a 5th Circuit victory in a multimillion-dollar business interruption insurance case on behalf of client Southwest Airlines. And on the defense side, the Beck Redden team has represented major energy companies in a variety of

business disputes, including significant wins on appeal or through dispositive motions for Enterprise Products Partners, Equinor, ExxonMobil, XTO Energy, Chesapeake Exploration, and more.

Now, would you believe the firm has fewer than 50 attorneys?

For the Houston-based firm, size is no limit to the cases they take on – in fact, it’s an asset. With a sole focus on litigation, Beck Redden is able to work nimbly across the docket, providing clients with the services they need without bureaucratic hang-ups.

Clients aren’t the only ones who see the benefit: The firm’s lean staffing also means that associates get world-class, standup experience right out of the gate. The firm, which celebrated its 30th anniversary in 2022, has been a haven for trial-hungry associates since its founding. “For the history of the firm, we’ve been very intentional about bringing in people who are the best and the brightest, who want to try lawsuits – or, in the case of appellate lawyers, who want to be first chair,” says Alistair B. Dawson, chair of the Executive Committee.

Now, Beck Redden is leveling up on that promise to clients and to its junior lawyers. In the last few years, the leadership team has focused on building for the future, improved mentorship models and an increased commitment to diversity and inclusion in the workplace – ensuring that the unique groundwork of the firm remains a catalyst for innovation, collaboration and peerless advocacy.

FROM DISCOVERY TO APPEAL

The maturity of Beck Redden’s litigation expertise is what sets the firm apart – and it has been cultivated over many years by partners who have only ever wanted to try cases.

One of those partners is Dawson, a Beck Redden veteran; he joined on the firm’s one-year anniversary 31 years ago. Dawson knew from day one of his legal career that he wanted to practice in the courtroom, and he jumped at the chance to get in on the ground floor of a firm that prized real-world experience. In recent matters, he helmed the team on a landmark \$438M win on behalf of tech titan HP, Inc., taking it from trial through the 5th Circuit (with the aid of Russell S. Post and others in the appellate group who secured an affirmance on appeal). Dawson largely focuses on defending companies in a wide range of business disputes, including breach of contract, securities, trade secrets and antitrust matters.

Dawson is joined by other longtime partners like Matthew Whitley, who has been with the firm since 2002. Whitley, a partner and chair of the Professional Development Committee, has a well-rounded litigation practice with a focus on IP and patent litigation. In one case, Whitley and his team represented SandBox Logistics in a suit against Arrows Up, a company contracted to help SandBox build a plastic version of its metal frac sand container. The suit alleged that Arrows Up later created its own line of plastic frac sand containers using SandBox’s design. After four weeks of trial, the jury came to a unanimous \$49.2M verdict in favor of SandBox – one of the top 10 verdicts in Texas in 2018.

And when cases go to appeal, whether the trial court proceedings were handled by the firm or not, the world-class appellate team at Beck Redden is ready to step in. “We have one of the best appellate departments in the state of Texas, without question,” says Whitley. “It gives us a huge advantage because one of the best assets you can have going to trial is a talented appellate lawyer at your side.” In 2003, founding partner David J. Beck asked then-hiring partner Dawson to bring on appellate talent. Dawson chose prominent Texas appellate lawyer David M. Gunn and his younger colleague, Post – and the firm took on a whole new dimension.

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Dawson considers hiring Gunn and Post among his most significant contributions to the firm in his three decades there – and it makes sense, because it became, and remains, a major differentiator for the Texas boutique. Post, now himself a celebrated appellate lawyer who has focused on appeals his entire career, says that building Beck Redden’s appellate practice was at once like starting from scratch – and the opposite. While the firm had never focused on appellate work before, “Beck Redden had such a prestigious reputation as a litigation boutique that there was a foundation of significant appellate business within the firm that we could handle,” says Post. That, in combination with Gunn’s already-significant book of business, meant the team started building a profile in the appellate arena right away. Over the last two decades, they have built a broadly diversified appellate docket that touches all aspects of civil litigation, as evidenced by Post’s recent win for Southwest Airlines and representation of ExxonMobil in a cutting-edge Clean Air Act case pending before the 5th Circuit *en banc*.

The firm’s open structure allows the appellate team full independence to develop their practice. “A litigation boutique gives you a lot more freedom,” says Post. “We’ve been fortunate to really grow the appellate group into a completely independent engine of the Beck Redden practice.”

To that end, Post estimates that approximately 30 percent of the firm’s appellate work comes from cases handled by Beck Redden in the trial courts; for the sources of the rest of their work, the appellate arm has established a significant outside pipeline of business. They are frequently referred work from respected lawyers in the Texas market who just don’t have the appellate chops present at Beck Redden. At the same time, they remain closely engaged with their trial colleagues.

The collaboration between the trial teams and appellate lawyers is a hallmark of Beck Redden’s approach, going the distance to ensure clients get the best result – as evidenced by the firm’s clearing a \$535M judgment in a landmark partnership dispute, where the firm’s lawyers laid the groundwork for victory in the trial court and remained central to the case all the way through success in the Texas Supreme Court. “Our appellate practice sets us apart from a number of the other litigation boutiques in Houston,” says Whitley.

AN ASSOCIATE'S PLAYING FIELD

The flow of collaboration between Beck Redden's trial and appellate groups is bolstered by the firm's tight-knit environment – an appealing prospect for associates looking to get experience early. "I am where I am today because I had the opportunity as a young lawyer to be punching well above my weight class," says Whitley. Twenty years later, he says, "We're doing the best we can to replicate that experience for incoming classes."

With leanly staffed trial teams and a strategic emphasis on stand-up experience for the firm's junior lawyers, Whitley's experience isn't just being replicated – it's being built upon. Mary Kate Raffetto, who was elected partner at the start of 2024, is a prime example. "I have always loved and been grateful to this firm because they have given me every opportunity I've ever asked for," says Raffetto, who joined Beck Redden following a federal judicial clerkship – a path followed by many of the firm's lawyers. "The firm really believes that the best way to develop a litigator's skills is by doing, by giving them the opportunity to hone those skills and actually use them in a courtroom."

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Raffetto, with 18 trials under her belt already, has cut her teeth on cases that are the stuff of dreams for most associates. One of her regular clients is a major pharmaceutical company with a large litigation docket. Raffetto was recently part of a team that won a complete defense verdict for the client in a products liability case in December of 2022 – Raffetto's first of the cases where she was guiding a more junior associate, Cassie Maneen, through her first trial experience.

Raffetto has also worked extensively with Whitley in his representation of U.S. Steel, handling multiple cases along with him. The legal energy market in Texas is, of course, massive, and it's telling that a major company like U.S. Steel would choose to trust a more streamlined litigation boutique – and its well-trained associates – over Big Law. That trust was earned with Beck Redden's first case for U.S. Steel, where Whitley and founding partner Joe Redden tried a four-week case over a \$63M contract dispute that settled after closing arguments. The trust earned in that case has lasted ever since. Whitley proudly says that his in-house contact with the company now routinely reaches out to associates directly, and Raffetto took on strategy sessions with the company's entire in-house legal team solo as a fifth to seventh year associate.

As the firm advances, so has its commitment to formalizing training for associates. As chair of the Professional Development Committee, Whitley, along with a team of colleagues, created formal mentorship pods a few years ago. Rather than assigning one partner to one associate for mentorship – which, Whitley says, can often end up being luck of the draw given a partner's time constraints or the right matchup – instead, associates have a whole group of assigned mentors at their disposal.

The mentor pods involve spreading partners out among the approximately five groups of associates. Each pod has a well-rounded mix of junior to senior partners for guidance. The pods meet anywhere from four to 12 times a year formally, answering questions and providing vital coaching in areas like business development early on in an associate's career.

Then, the partners are always available for informal conversations – and more efficiently than in a more traditional one-on-one mentorship model. “If I as an associate have a question, instead of, ‘Oh, I’ve only got one mentor and he’s in a four-week trial in Delaware,’ I’ve got a group,” explains Whitley. In addition, as associates progress, the firm encourages them to find a sponsor – the partner who will help guide them to the partnership track.

BUILDING A FIRM FOR EVERYONE

It's not only the associates' experience that has been revitalized recently. About five years ago, the firm developed a new strategic plan targeted at shaking up leadership. Dawson says that he and the Executive Committee noted that most of them had been on the committee for 20 years at that point, and there hadn't been many changes. Knowing that a firm needs to evolve in order to thrive, they instituted a new system wherein the role of chair will change hands every few years.

Dawson put his hand up to be chair this cycle because he knew a change in leadership structure wasn't the only area the firm could improve upon. “There are some issues that we as a firm need to face,” says Dawson.

At the top of Dawson's list was investing in the firm's commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion – ensuring the firm is an environment where diverse voices thrive. The firm is actively looking to increase and retain attorneys from traditionally underrepresented groups in the firm and the industry.

Having the humbleness to admit when change needs to be made is vital in a leader, and Dawson is open about developing and committing to actionable change. The new mentorship pods are one step toward achieving equitable advancement opportunities, but Dawson and his team are embracing help from the outside, as well. In the fall of 2022, the firm retained Mindy Gulati, founder and CEO of Fundamental Advisory, a consultant who specializes in coaching law firms and companies on issues related to culture, leadership, and diversity, equity, and inclusion. Gulati, who spent a decade as a lawyer herself, focuses on helping her clients meet their goals when it comes to DEI and developing measurable strategies to ensure that those goals are met.

From the beginning, Gulati was impressed with how the partners embraced her advice; there was no shying away from the challenges. “To me, this firm has really put first of its kind effort into this work,” she says. “I tell people about Beck Redden, and I say that they're the firm I'm the proudest of. I truly love these people because I have not been in firms that have such a collective desire to learn and do better,” she says. It's vital to have an open conversation that leads to action, and that's just what the firm is doing.

A COMMITMENT TO INTEGRITY AND EACH OTHER

Dedication to a diversity of talent not only establishes equity within the firm, but also improves quality of work, says Raffetto. “Not only is it the right thing to do, but it also makes us more effective courtroom advocates. If you are not working with a diverse group of people to create the story you’re going to tell at trial, I think you’re putting your client at a big disadvantage,” she explains. “So, it’s important to us, not only because we care about making the world a more equitable place – and we do – but because it’s important for us to be effective advocates for our clients.”

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Effective advocacy, commitment to lawyers of all levels, and a respect for the legal profession have always been central pillars of the firm. The firm is well-served by its founding partners’ continued influence: “It’s very much a vision of law practice as an honorable profession,” says Post. “We are zealous advocates, but we also place a great deal of weight on the respect we have for the legal process, the integrity of the firm, and the reputation we have within the legal community.”

And, as the firm continues to evolve, those traits remain a constant underpinning of a firm where innovation is prized, where collaboration is rewarded. A firm that is committed not to stuffiness or hierarchy, but to a collective mindset. “We are a team at Beck Redden and we support each other as a team,” says Dawson. The firm, from the associate level through its partners, he says, is made up of go-getters who will take the ball and run with it when it’s passed. But they’ll never turn their back on a teammate. “It’s not about individual accolades,” he says. “It’s about doing top-quality work and representing our clients to the best of our ability.”



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