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DAILY REPORT

ON THE RISE

15 TO WATCH

Our staff's annual picks of lawyers under 40 we think you should know more about



PHOTO BY ZACHARY D. FORREY/DAILY REPORT

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15 young lawyers to watch

Nominated by our readers; handpicked by our editorial staff

THE FIRST CASE LEIGH BRASLOW ALTMAN litigated as lead counsel—which began the year she graduated from law school—involved nearly 20,000 victims of a mail scam, 56,446 separate violations of the Fair Business Practices Act, 200 pleadings, four years of litigation, three defendants, two trials and, in the end, a \$1.8 million jury verdict with an additional \$20 million in civil penalties.

As if that weren't enough, Altman, who was 28 at the conclusion of the case, had the book thrown at her. Literally.

During depositions, opposing counsel chucked a copy of the Civil Practice Act across a table at her, according to Sidney R. Barrett Jr., a senior assistant attorney general who sat second chair when Altman tried the case as a fledgling lawyer in the state law department. (Altman's now in private practice at Gary Leshaw & Associates in Decatur.) The case, which involved a mail scam telling elderly people

ON THE RISE PROFILE:

Leigh Braslow Altman

ASSOCIATE, *Gary Leshaw & Associates*

- **Age:** 35
- **Law school:** Florida State University College of Law
- **Motivation:** "I really want to do a solid job, and I really want to help people."
- **Last book read:** "Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows," by J.K. Rowling
- **Best advice received:** From her father, an attorney, on how to deal with opposing counsel: "When they don't have anything, they're just going to try to dazzle you with B.S. So, see behind that and be prepared."
- **As a kid she wanted to be:** an ACLU lawyer (inspired by Barbara Hershey's character in the 1988 movie "Beaches")
- **Interesting fact:** Growing up in Gulf Breeze, Fla., she learned to drive a motor boat at age 10—well before she could drive a car.



- **Dream adventure:** For this married mom of two boys, ages 1 and 4, an "adventure" would be reading and sleeping in a hotel room for a week.

they'd won \$10,000 and could claim their prize for a \$65 or \$70 fee, was rife with discovery abuses, Barrett recalls. Also, he says, his office was under pressure to just put the defendants out of business, rather than pursue the case to judgment.

The civil judgment Altman won, in 2000 and 2001, is still the largest in the history of the

Governor's Office of Consumer Affairs.

"I've never seen one person put up with so much grief as she did in the prosecution of one case," says Barrett, now the chief of the consumer interest section at the law department. "Her closing argument to the jury was just brutal. ... She found the most pitiful [letter from an elderly defendant] of

all, in this spidery handwriting, and showed and read it to the jury and they wanted to throttle these people when she was through.”

Georgia Supreme Court Justice Harold D. Melton, Altman’s supervisor in the state Law Department at the time, calls her “one of the most conscientious warriors that you’ll find.” He explains that the case was especially difficult because it was the first one the Governor’s Office of Consumer Affairs had taken to a jury, so there was no template.

Melton mentions another case she handled while with the Law Department, involving a tree cutter’s price-gouging, following a 1998 tornado that swept through Gwinnett County.

Altman recalls taking one man’s deposition at a retirement home and learning that the tree cutter had charged him \$8,132 for a half hour’s work. The litigation was hostile, too: Altman says the tree cutter, in an apparent attempt to intimidate, handed a live ammunition cartridge to the investigator on her team. She didn’t tell the judge right away, instead calling Melton at home the next morning.

“I guess I wanted a reality check. I didn’t want to sound alarms if I should just be tough,” she says. She ended up telling the judge, and the second day of depositions was called off while the court put safety measures in place. Ultimately, she won the

case on behalf of eight or nine victims.

“She paid her dues,” Melton says.

After six years at the state Law Department, she’s now in private practice with Gary Leshaw & Associates, where much of her work focuses on consumer-side issues.

Leshaw, who got an up-close view of Altman’s skills long before he hired her—he was the judge, sitting by designation, in the case involving the \$10,000 prize money scam—says she’s become very proficient, especially in consumer-side construction cases, identity theft, automobile and mortgage fraud matters.

But beyond pure legal proficiency, he says, Altman knows how to deal with people, especially those who are under stress. “I think she’s become real good with making people feel at ease,” he says. That’s important, he adds, “because we represent people, we don’t represent [big] companies.”

Leshaw points out that many of Altman’s cases are the human equivalent of a corporate lawyer’s bet-the-company litigation because they involve such crucial things as houses and financial security. It’s a type of practice where success is defined not just by a big verdict, but also by simply getting a just result for a client.

As a case in point, Leshaw

mentions one situation where Altman kept on working for a client long after she’d stopped getting paid.

The client, Altman says, stopped to help when she saw a disabled vehicle. While crossing the street, she was struck by an oncoming car. It is, Altman says, “an amazing act of kindness that most people wouldn’t do.”

The woman lost one leg; her other leg has pins in it, and she now uses a wheelchair. The other driver, who was cited only for not having a current license, had minimal insurance.

Altman says her client had more than \$100,000 in medical bills. Medicare paid them, but put a lien on any judgment she’d get. The case settled for \$25,000, all of which Medicare was entitled to under the law.

“She was going to get nothing, and we went back and forth and back and forth with Medicare for at least a year,” Altman says. “I pled her case to everyone I talked to every time. The letters that I sent went through in painstaking detail how innocent she was, how her life had been shattered.”

Ultimately, she says, Medicare waived its entire claim.

Altman’s whole career is about persistence and dedication to justice, says Barrett, her former colleague at the AG’s office, adding, “People like Leigh, they bring down giants once in awhile.”

—Janet L. Conley