

LAW WEEK

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YEAR

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*– Cliff Stricklin,
King & Spalding partner*



2024 Lawyers of the Year: Cliff Stricklin

MICHAEL RUMMEL | LAW WEEK COLORADO

Saying Cliff Stricklin has seen a lot in his career would be an understatement. From his time in front of the bench and behind it, Stricklin has prosecuted and heard some incredible cases.

Stricklin, a partner at King & Spalding, began his career in the government before he became a lawyer. His first job out of college took him to the nation's capital, where he worked on asset forfeiture cases at the Drug Enforcement Administration. This was a particularly busy time to be working for the DEA, and some of his work included cases dealing with the Medellin Cartel, Pablo Escobar, Jorge Ochoa and Carlos Lehder.

"My interest was in law enforcement and in justice matters to begin with," said Stricklin. "I knew that I probably wanted to go to law school."

Following his graduation from Washington and Lee University School of Law, he went straight back into government work. He joined the government as an assistant U.S. attorney, starting out with drug cases before moving up to public corruption cases.

After eight years, he felt the calling of a different kind of public service and ran for judge in Texas, where he won the 2000 election and served as a state district judge in Dallas for four years.

"There were some issues that were going on at the time that really spoke to me from a justice perspective," said Stricklin. "They had to deal with domestic violence, and what I kind of view as good old boy-ism in the courthouse and the old way of doing things that I felt like needed to change. And I had the opportunity to step in and challenge an incumbent, a longtime incumbent judge, to bring about that change."

As part of his work in that judgeship, he worked to create a mental health court.

"Our jail system is unfortunately the de facto kind of mental hospital system in America," said Stricklin. "And a lot of folks, there's various statistics, 60%, 70%, 80% of folks that are incarcerated have some form of mental illness. So creating a mental health court, we can treat people and give them the assistance they need to keep them out of prison while they are on probation and help [guide] them."

In addition to the mental health courts, he changed the way attorneys got appointed to indigent defendants and worked with the courthouse to create a daycare center in the courthouse so people without childcare could leave their kids somewhere safe while they were in court.

Within two years of his election, he became the presiding judge in Dallas County.

"I was pretty young, maybe that was part of it. I was young and naive and didn't know that we couldn't do some things," said Stricklin of the administrative changes he fought for. "But it was a pretty intense fight internally to make that happen."

THE CASES THAT SHAPE YOU

Following his time as a judge, Stricklin joined the Enron Task Force at the Department of Justice and was one of the lead prosecutors on the Enron Broadband case. Stricklin also presented evidence against CEO Jeff Skilling and Chairman of the Board Ken Lay.

After those cases, Stricklin found himself feeling burnt out on the law.

"It was a very intense time," said Stricklin. "What I always tell folks is it was lot of scrutiny from the media, from your opposing counsel, very good opposing counsel from the largest law firms in America, and even internal scrutiny from the Department of Justice. And it was just a really difficult, challenging time and I wasn't sure what I wanted to do next until I got a call from the U.S. attorney here at the time, Troy Eid, who wanted me to come up and try one more white collar case."

The white collar case was against former Qwest CEO Joseph Nacchio, and was the largest insider trading case in U.S. history at the time. Stricklin said Eid and his wife, Judge Allison Eid, were gracious and made promises to get Stricklin to Colorado, and they lived up to each one of them. Stricklin joined the team and went from having a difficult time with the Enron cases to an enjoyable one trying the case against Nacchio.

"After that victory, I realized that I really enjoyed building teams with good people to try to achieve a just result on something and found out I really loved being a lawyer and doing this type of work," said Stricklin. "So that was my move to Colorado. I was a first assistant here for two years and then went into private practice, where my practice has focused on just that."

Stricklin focuses his private practice work on the intersection of civil and criminal law. He and his team deal with litigation, trial issues and guiding companies and executives to keep them out of court where possible.

Stricklin is now a partner at King & Spalding, and recently represented Leprino Food Company and its board against a \$2 billion lawsuit from the nieces of Leprino's founder, James Leprino.

"When Leprino's nieces sued, seeking to dissolve LFC and demanding \$2 billion in damages alleging fiduciary breaches, LFC and the Board turned to long-time counsel Stricklin to navigate this epic bet-the-company dispute," Deborah Argueta wrote in the submission of Stricklin for the award. Argueta noted Stricklin demonstrated the benefit of Leprino's leadership over the course of a two-week jury trial in December 2022. The jury returned a complete defense verdict after three hours of deliberation. "Afterward, the jury foreperson told Stricklin, 'Your closing was amazing... It pieced together a lot of the evidence we had questions about.'"

In addition to the Leprino case, Stricklin won other big cases in the past few years. In 2022, Stricklin represented former CEO of DaVita Kent Thiry in a case where he was accused of violating antitrust regulations dealing with no-poach and non-solicitation agreements. The case ended with not guilty verdicts on both counts.

Stricklin also defended Xcel Energy and the Public Service Company of Colorado in a case where they were accused of the death of five contract workers. He secured acquittals on all counts for that case.

"I'm very fortunate that I've had clients that were willing to do the right thing," said Stricklin. "Even if that means putting a lot at risk, and standing up for what's right and not just taking an easy plea deal or not just entering in some sort of settlement along the way. But saying no, if you're telling me we didn't do anything wrong, then let's bring this to a jury and let a jury decide."

A FOCUS ON COMMUNITY

Stricklin and his wife are active members in the Denver community, and he said his focus on community comes from his upbringing.

"I was brought up in a home where 'to whom much is given much is required' and I really believe in being involved, in making Denver our home, a special place," said Stricklin. "To make sure that folks have a safe place to live, that it's a vibrant, healthy atmosphere."

Stricklin is a board member of [Urban Peak](#), a former board member at [Blue Bench](#) and a sponsor of [Robbie's Hope](#).

Urban Peak helps youth experiencing homelessness in Colorado. He's been on the board of Urban Peak for three years, and told Law Week he and his wife have given a lot of their resources, time, energy and money to help youth experiencing homelessness.

Blue Bench focuses its work on sexual assault prevention and Robbie's Hope aims to stop the suicide epidemic among teens.

Stricklin said he's already seen the impact of Robbie's Hope.

"If you look statistically, teenage suicide deaths have actually decreased here in Colorado this last year. And I think Robbie's Hope is playing a part in that and I think it will continue to grow and be a great organization," said Stricklin.

"I think if there's a common thread here, [it's] looking out for folks who may not have a voice, who may not be heard, who are often overlooked, but are in our communities and sometimes in our criminal justice system or in our justice system as a whole and need assistance and need a safe space."