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LIFETIME ACHIEVERS

Our seventh annual awards honor outstanding private sector success and a devotion to public service.

AT THE AMERICAN LAWYER, we keep a running list of men and women we might like to recognize at some point as Lifetime Achievers. This year, our final roster includes eight lawyers who met our standards for exemplary public service and outstanding professional success.

The 2010 list honors a former judge, Skadden, Arps, Slate, Meagher & Flom's Judith Kaye; a civil rights icon, Columbia Law School's Jack Greenberg; a pathbreaking managing partner, Alston & Bird's Ben Johnson III (winner of our second Law Firm Distinguished Leader Award); a former governor, Winston & Strawn's James Thompson; and three men who have put their civic duties at the core of their professional work: Hogan Lovells's Joseph Bell; Fried, Frank, Harris, Shriver & Jacobson's Robert Juceam; and Sonnenschein Nath & Rosenthal's Errol Stone.

Robert Joffe, Cravath, Swaine & Moore's former presiding partner, was on our running list from the beginning; in fact, he helped create the list with some wise advice about using this process to remind lawyers that it was possible to have a distinguished career at the private bar and make important contributions to public life. Joffe was still very active, and we planned to get to him later. Sadly, he died last winter from cancer at age 66. We've never made a posthumous award before. But here, as in life, Joffe was exceptional.

PHOTOGRAPHY PORTFOLIO BY MICHAEL J.N. BOWLES

BEN JOHNSON III, *Alston & Bird*



FOR RETIRED ALSTON & BIRD PARTNER Ben Johnson III, the starting point for any discussion of his career isn't his major client relationships or his 11-year tenure as managing partner, but rather, his mentors. That list includes his father, Ben Johnson, Jr., dean at both Emory University School of Law and Georgia State University College of Law; Archibald Cox, for whom Johnson was a research assistant while at Harvard Law School; Griffin Bell, for whom he clerked on the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Fifth Circuit; and Philip Alston, Jr., who took a special interest in Johnson when he joined the firm in 1971. "They provided an example with their integrity, work ethic, willingness to teach, and involvement in the larger community," Johnson says.

These principles have defined Johnson's career as a lawyer and guided him as managing partner of Alston & Bird from 1997 to 2008. During Johnson's tenure, the firm stepped up its participation in pro bono work, fostered diversity, and emphasized work/life balance—all while expanding from a 305-lawyer Atlanta firm with a small Washington, D.C., office into a far-flung enterprise of more than 800 lawyers. For these accomplishments, in addition to his extensive community service, we award Johnson, 67, our Law Firm Distinguished Leader Award for 2010. "The values Ben talks about are values you would like to see in your firm," says Richard Hays, Johnson's successor as managing partner.

You don't have to take Hays's word for it: Every year for the past 11, the firm has made *Fortune's* list of its "100 Best Companies to Work For." In 2001 Alston & Bird established a child care center steps away from its Atlanta office; the facility provides full- and part-time care for 110 dependents of Alston & Bird employees. "The basic philosophical approach has been to assemble a very loyal, dedicated, and happy workforce, which translates into positive client experiences," Johnson says.

Under him, the firm first appointed partners to oversee its pro bono and diversity initiatives. In 2004 Alston & Bird represented plaintiffs challenging an amendment to the Georgia constitution that banned same-sex marriage. The Georgia Supreme Court upheld the ban in a 2006 ruling; while the case was going on, Johnson found himself on the receiving end of hate mail. Last year the firm's lawyers performed an average of 57.4 hours of pro bono work, compared to 52.8 in 1997, the first year of Johnson's tenure as managing partner, and 57.7 percent of the firm's lawyers completed 20 hours or more of pro bono work, compared to 45.9 percent in 1997.

In the area of diversity, while the firm's total attorney and partner ranks have grown by 23 and 22 percent over the past five years, its number of minority lawyers has increased 82 percent, to 122, and its number of minority partners has risen 68 percent, to 27.

Johnson, a litigator with a practice focusing on representing financial institutions (among his longtime clients were Citizens & Southern Na-

tional Bank, now part of Bank of America Corporation, and First Union Corporation, now part of Wells Fargo & Company), also oversaw a major expansion of the firm. "If you were headquartered in New York or Chicago perhaps that's all you needed, but for an Atlanta firm to be perceived as national, you had to have something more," Johnson says.

Just months after he became managing partner, Alston & Bird merged with Bell, Seltzer, Park & Gibson, a North Carolina firm. The merger doubled Alston's number of offices and gave it a sizable intellectual property practice.

In 2001 Alston & Bird gained a New York presence by merging with Walter, Conston, Alexander & Green, and in 2007 it moved into Texas by merging with Dallas's Crews, Shepherd & McCarty. Since Johnson stepped down, the firm has gone on to open a Silicon Valley office and merge with Los Angeles's Weston Benschhof Rochefort Rubalcava & MacCuish.

Johnson says that Alston's expansion has allowed it to handle large, high-profile matters such as the Enron Corp. bankruptcy, where the firm represented the examiner. Johnson points to that representation as a key moment in Alston & Bird's recent evolution: "We were constantly under the watchful eye of the court and major law firms around the country who were representing clients involved in the [Enron] matter," he says. "It was an opportunity to demonstrate our judgment, capabilities, and professionalism in a very prominent national setting."

Over the years, there were partners who didn't buy into Johnson's vision for the firm. "He would spend a lot of time with partners and listen to their concerns and try to accommodate [them] as much as possible," says James Hutchinson, the New York-based chair of the firm's partners committee. "But Ben was not shy about wielding authority." Says Johnson: "Part of law firm leadership is painting a vision of a firm that has to accomplish certain things, and to make sure most of the partners don't see the investments you are making as frivolous, but [rather, as] necessary in order to make that vision a reality."

Despite Johnson's commitment to expanding Alston & Bird beyond Atlanta, he remains an outside figure in that city. "There have been a number of extraordinary law firm leaders in Atlanta," says Chilton Varner, a King & Spalding partner who serves on the board of Emory University and the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra with Johnson. "There has been nobody more connected than Ben." In addition to serving as the chair of the boards of Emory (a position he has held for ten years), the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra and Atlanta's Woodward Academy, Johnson also serves on the boards of the Carter Center and Woodruff Arts Center.

"Many of the things he has been involved with, such as education, commerce, the arts, and transportation, are at the core of any city, any civilization," says Emory president James Wagner. "In many ways, Ben Johnson is a mentor for me, and not just a boss." —DREW COMBS



Ben Johnson III
Alston & Bird