



Ronald C. Machen: The Driving Force of Effective Mentorship

Ronald C. Machen, a member of his firm's global Management Committee and co-chair of WilmerHale's Investigations and Criminal Litigation Group, has an impressive record of achievements. He is a graduate of Stanford University and Harvard Law School and has tried more than 35 cases to verdict. He also served as the United States Attorney for the District of Columbia—the nation's largest United States Attorney's Office—for over five years under President Obama from 2010 to 2015.

When reflecting on his professional accomplishments, however, Machen often directs his praise outward. "I was fortunate enough to have several effective mentors throughout my career—not just people who provided general guidance, but a number of educators, judges, and practicing attorneys who were deeply committed to my success."

Many attorneys realize the importance of mentorship later in their careers—for instance, when seeking a promotion or a different career opportunity. Yet, for Machen, the power of effective mentorship became evident at the start of his legal education. "On my first day at Harvard Law School, I was introduced to Professor Charles Ogletree," Machen recalled. "We developed a strong relationship because we had similar backgrounds and interests. We both played football at Stanford, and I was interested in developing trial advocacy skills and civil rights experience, which were his core areas of expertise. Looking back, I was so fortunate to have been able to connect with such a legal giant at an early point in my career."

From that point forward, Machen pursued opportunities that would lead to personal connection, investment, and relationships. Before entering law school, Machen wrote a paper on *City of Richmond v. J.A. Croson Co.*, a Supreme Court case holding that the city's minority set-aside program for municipal contracts was unconstitutional under the Equal Protection Clause. When Machen learned that John Payton, then a partner at WilmerHale, had defended the city's program in the Supreme Court, Machen decided

to join the firm and was able to work on cases with Payton as a junior associate.

However, the most transformational shift of Machen's career came about one year later, when he was hired as a law clerk for the Honorable Damon J. Keith, federal judge on the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Sixth Circuit. In fact, Machen largely credits Judge Keith with developing his interest in serving as a federal prosecutor. "When I started clerking, I never thought that I would later serve as a federal prosecutor. But Judge Keith told me repeatedly that federal prosecutors are critical players in the criminal justice system because they hold the discretion to make charging decisions. It was important to him to see more diverse attorneys serving in those roles and helping to ensure 'equal justice under law.'"

A few years later, when Machen applied to serve as an Assistant U.S. Attorney, Judge Keith once again broke barriers for Machen. "He actually picked up the phone and called then-U.S. Attorney Eric Holder—another significant mentor—to push for my selection as an Assistant United States Attorney in the office." Machen was hired soon thereafter.

At this point in Machen's career, most of his mentorship experiences are happening laterally from peers, rather than from more senior attorneys. "I have received incredible opportunities from General Counsels at major global corporations, including Panasonic Corporation of North America, the National Collegiate Athletic Association, and Toyota Motor Company. These colleagues have given me a chance to showcase my skills, as well as the capabilities of other talented, diverse attorneys on my teams."

Today, Machen is equally passionate about mentoring future attorneys of color entering and developing in the profession. "I'm always trying to pave the way for younger attorneys," Machen said. "I have built lasting relationships with talented diverse attorneys, both in the government and in the private sector. Going forward, I look forward to helping them—just as others have helped me—in actively facilitating their success." **S**