

Titan Of The Plaintiffs Bar: Robbins Geller's Shawn Williams

By Reenat Sinay

Law360 (May 14, 2019, 2:12 PM EDT) -- "Have you seen 'Hamilton'?" asked Shawn Williams of Robbins Geller. Quoting from one of the hit Broadway show's most memorable songs, the securities litigation partner explained that it speaks to why he was drawn to the plaintiffs side of the bar.

"There's something to be said for being 'in the room where it happens,' being in the room where decisions are made as opposed to hearing them afterward and responding to them," he said.

As one of the few black plaintiffs lawyers he knows of in securities litigation, Williams said it was important to him to have a seat at the table that was leading the conversation, rather than reacting to it when choosing his path within the legal industry.

He became a New York prosecutor straight out of law school, spending five years learning "the practicalities of practicing law" at the Manhattan District Attorney's Office.

"Some friends always asked why I would want to work as a prosecutor in light of the general belief that many prosecutions, especially in big cities, unequally affect minorities and particularly black men," he said. "I always felt like if I was going to make a difference in that area, I could make a difference being on that side."

In the nearly 20 years that he has been at Robbins Geller Rudman & Dowd LLP in San Francisco, Williams has litigated both securities class actions and derivative suits, recovering tens of millions of dollars for his shareholder clients and snagging a spot as one of Law360's Titans of the Plaintiffs Bar for 2019.

For much of that time, securities litigation partner Travis Downs III has worked closely with Williams at Robbins Geller, often teaming up to play "good cop, bad cop" on shareholder derivative cases.

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TITANS

OF THE
Plaintiffs Bar



Shawn Williams
Robbins Geller

Advice For Success:
"I believe in all of the cases that we work on, I believe that our clients are deserving of recovery, of some restitution, and that is motivating. Some people don't believe in their work, but I believe in the work."

Writing, arguing and analysis are some of Williams' strongest lawyering skills, but it is what Downs called "the intangibles" that makes Williams "about the best lawyer I know."

"He has this incredible sense of timing and ability to read people," Downs said. "I've seen him do this multiple times in negotiations; getting a person to walk themselves out on a limb and knowing when to end that conversation so you've got the high ground. It's an instinctual, situational awareness."

Williams was certainly "in the room where it happens" when he led negotiations for an unusual deal to resolve derivative shareholder claims against Wells Fargo in what the firm said is "believed to be the first of its kind involving shareholder derivative claims."

The City of Westland Police & Fire Retirement System v. Wells Fargo & Co. revolved around the bank's "robo-signing" practice of executing false documents, leading to the expedited foreclosure of homes, particularly in minority communities.

He secured a \$67 million settlement that included \$36.5 million in down payment assistance for several predominantly African American communities around the country, \$6 million in credit counseling programs for customers in need, as well as initiatives aimed at rehabilitating Wells Fargo's reputation.

Downs worked with Williams on the case and said the goal of helping not only their clients, but the communities affected by the bank's actions was "a tall order."

"That's not traditionally what we do as plaintiffs securities lawyers," Downs said. "But to have the vision to think about that and the skills to make that idea a reality speaks to the caliber and quality of not just him as a lawyer, but him as a person."

Growing up as the son of Jamaican and Panamanian immigrants in New Rochelle, New York, Williams fantasized about being an athlete or a pilot, but his insatiable intellectual curiosity eventually led him down the path of the law.

After graduating from the State University of New York at Albany with a bachelor's degree in English, Williams followed in the footsteps of his older sister and pursued his law degree at the University of Illinois.

He worked at the Legal Aid Society during law school and joined the DA's office after graduation. Williams then found his way to the realm of securities litigation through a friend and former colleague in the state prosecutor's office who had already made the jump, and found that it was a "natural transition" for him as well.

In the past year alone, he's achieved major breakthroughs for his shareholder clients in yearslong cases against medical device company Medtronic Inc., Chinese e-commerce company Alibaba Group Holdings Ltd. and Facebook Inc.

Williams secured final approval in December for a \$43 million cash settlement from Medtronic, ending five years of securities fraud allegations over its payments to researchers to hide the risks of its bone graft technology, culminating in the loss of hundreds of millions of dollars in a 2011 stock drop.

A \$75 million settlement with Alibaba to resolve claims that the company misled institutional investors about its financial health got the initial OK in January.

Looking ahead, Williams expects to see an expansion in litigation revolving around the intersection of technology and the law, particularly concerning data collection and privacy.

Williams is focused on the closely watched *In re: Facebook Biometric Information Privacy Litigation*, in which certification of the class he is representing is currently on appeal in the Ninth Circuit. His Facebook user clients are challenging the social media giant's collection of facial biometric data in photo tagging without written consent, and Facebook faces potentially tens of billions of dollars in liability. "That case has elements of what we will see more of in the future; the cross section of law and technology, and the question of whether the law can really keep up with technological innovation," Williams said. "That case really presents some law and technology issues that haven't really been developed yet, so we'll see how that plays out."

In the meantime, Williams said he'll keep doing what he's been doing.

"I just do what I do," he said. "I believe in all of the cases that we are involved in, I believe that our clients are deserving of recovery, of some restitution, and that is motivating. Some people don't believe in their work, but I believe in the work."

--Editing by Katherine Rautenberg and Alyssa Miller.