

# An Overview of the Labor & Employment Mentorship Academy: An Interview With Jay Rollins



**J. Daniel Cole**

## *What is the Mentorship Academy?*

The Mentorship Academy is a program that was started in the Labor & Employment Law Section in the summer of 2016 to pair seasoned labor and employment lawyers with those less seasoned. People always assume mentoring means younger lawyers, but that isn't necessarily always the case. The Mentorship Academy has had mentees that have been practicing law for many, many years but are new to labor and employment law or people who went to law school later in life.

## *What is the driving goal or purpose of the Mentorship Academy in creating these mentoring relationships?*

The ultimate goal, at least from my perspective, was to serve three purposes: 1) to foster a sense of community within the Labor & Employment Law Section; 2) to elevate the professional and ethical among attorneys; and 3) ultimately to give mentees a safe place to discuss issues that come up with more experienced attorneys, whether those issues be professional development, firm politics, marketing or any number of areas.

## *What types of attorneys are served by the Mentorship Academy?*

The Mentorship Academy serves 15 mentees with 15 mentors on average each year. We have a plaintiff's side and defense side, as well as union attorneys. Every year, we have also had at least one or more in-house counsel mentor/mentee pair, as well as government attorney pairings.

*Not everyone is fortunate to be in a structure that provides or encourages mentorship. What is the importance of finding mentors as a young, or less seasoned, attorney?*

Let's face it, the practice of law is not easy, and the concept of doing something on your own is daunting at best. The importance of having someone to turn to, whether it is with regard to substantive law or administrative tasks or simply how to run a practice, it moves the process forward more quickly.

Before the Labor & Employment Law Section Mentorship Academy, there was a smaller program in the Georgia Affiliate of the National Employment Lawyers Association, or NELA-GA. The reason for instituting the program was that people were coming out of law school and could not find a job during the recession and were hanging out a shingle and didn't have the experience to navigate plaintiff's employment practice, much less running a practice. A lot of our NELA-GA mentees were solo practitioners and just needed guidance or someone to go to with basic questions or frustrations of running a practice. The Mentorship Academy grew out of NELA's program to expand mentoring opportunities to labor and employment lawyers statewide, outside of NELA-GA and the plaintiff's employment practice.

## *Who were your personal mentors?*

I always have to start with Judge Duross Fitzpatrick, whom I clerked for. Judge Fitzpatrick was a great judge but, even more so, an awesome person. He taught me the value of the word professionalism and that ours is a profession. I went from Judge Fitzpatrick to working at Fisher Phillips where Don Wright was probably my biggest mentor. When I think of mentors, I don't necessarily think of people I turn to when it comes to the law. I think of people who guided me in my practice and my profession.



James E. "Jay" Rollins

Also, Bert Brannen, who was an instrumental founder of the academy and is on the board, had just made partner when I started at Fisher Phillips. Though we were about the same age, he was terrific as a younger and newer partner with helping me talk through issues.

## *Given that the Mentorship Academy is now in its third year, how has it fared?*

I am biased, but I believe the program has been very, very successful. We have received nothing but very positive feedback from the participants. Every year, we try to add new wrinkles to the program. This year, for the first time, we added a courtroom experience, where mentors and mentees argue points of law before actual federal judges in a federal courtroom. There is at least one other section that has begun its own mentoring program in part because of the success of the Labor & Employment Mentorship Academy. Other sections have also expressed interest in replicating the program. YLD