

TURNER: Daniel Coker and the new legal landscape

by Alan Turner

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In a recent meeting with Ed Taylor, a director and litigation practice manager for Daniel, Coker, Horton, and Bell, we talked about how the practice of law has changed in Mississippi in recent years.

On the whole, Taylor believes that the system has improved considerably since the institution of tort reform. He has good reason to know, as the firm is one of the largest in Mississippi, with 51 attorneys and more than 100 total employees on its payroll. The firm's key specialty is litigation, and it most often represents defendants in insurance cases, along with other civil cases. Among the firm's clients are insurance companies and their client businesses and individual policyholders, as well as cities and counties that are sued, and many others.

Taylor grew up in Lake Charles, La., attended McNeese State University and went on to law school at Mississippi College School of Law. He's been in Mississippi ever since, and considers it his home. Based in the firm's Gulfport offices, he tries cases throughout the state.

Daniel, Coker, Horton, and Bell was founded in 1946, and today has offices in Gulfport, Jackson, and Oxford. The firm prides itself on its stability and reputation, and has never laid off an attorney due to tort reform or economic conditions. Taylor points to the firm's commitment to provide "great service to our clients, at rates that are not extravagant" as a key element in their success.

Asked how he views settlement awards today, Taylor said that "juries nowadays seem to have a good measure of common sense. If someone is trying to get something for nothing, it doesn't usually work with today's jurors." He thinks that by and large, "jackpot justice" has gone away in Mississippi, and he thinks that the concept of a "fair trial" is alive and well in our state.

"There seems to be the misconception that if you defend an insurance company or business, you're bound to lose," he said. "That is just not the case today. Cases today get decided on their merits."

When asked what he thought of as some of Mississippi's best assets, he pointed to people.

"We have a great bunch of folks in our state, who have great work ethic and determination to succeed."

He pointed out some of the state's great success stories, including Ingall's Shipbuilding, Sanderson Farms and others, as being companies that are built on the great work done by their employees and managers.

"We have a strong and stable business community in Mississippi," he said. "Our state is business friendly, and this a great place to work, live, and ultimately, to retire."

That doesn't mean the state is perfect, he pointed out. "Obviously, the most important issue in our state is improving our education system at all levels. That also means improving our technical education options," he said.

He also thinks there may be a need for some tax reform in Mississippi, and suggests that this might be crucial to attracting more business to the state. "Other states are addressing this," he said, "and we should probably do the same if we want to be competitive."

He thinks there will be strong growth in onshoring, health care, and other areas in years to come, "and we should be ready for it."

One concern he expressed is the whole issue of flood insurance in coastal zones. "The cost has just about gone out of sight," he said, "This clearly has a strong impact on the affordability of homes at all level." Aside from that, he believes the Coast has a "very bright future" once it has fully recovered from the negative effects of Hurricane Katrina.

He also expressed concerns about how businesses and individuals will be impacted by the Affordable Care Act. "In particular, I know that many hospitals and medical facilities are deeply concerned about what's coming their way. It's difficult to know how it will all shake out."

What does Ed Taylor like most about practicing law?

"Well, it's stimulating and nerve-wracking at the same time," he said. "I love trial work, and I'm not the type to be happy sitting at my desk all day every day. I love getting in front of a jury, and when I win a case, it's a great thrill and satisfaction. Of course, losing is something else, but you have to take both winning and losing as a part of the process."

With the number of cases he tries, and a strong record of successful outcomes, it would certainly seem that Ed Taylor is in the right job.

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Ed Taylor of Daniel, Coker, Horton, and Bell sees "jackpot justice" as a thing of the past here in Mississippi. "If someone is trying to get something for nothing, it doesn't usually work with today's jurors," he added. (Photo by Stephen McDill)