

A Mock Trial Led Student to Become Lawyer Hooked on the Real Thing

As a student and a lawyer, Jeff Gutchess endured some kicks but now runs his own firm.

By CARLOS HARRISON

Jeff Gutchess got into law because of a kick in the knee.

It happened in the eighth grade: Gutchess was playing lawyer in a mock jury trial. He was questioning a girl he knew was lying. He kept grilling the witness until she cracked.

“I literally caught her in a lie,” he said. “And when she realized I had done that she looked at me with this face like she was so angry, and she got up from the witness stand and walked over and kicked me in the knee.”

There would be more, at least metaphorically.

“Honest to God, I would say that in practicing law now for 25 years, you take a lot of kicks,” he said. “I think that was an omen of what it was going to be like.”

Without that first one, though, Gutchess might never have even thought of going into law.



Jeff Gutchess, AXS Law Group.

“I didn’t know any lawyers. I didn’t know what it took to become a lawyer,” he said. “But it kind of got settled in the back of my brain someplace.”

He grew up in a town in upstate New York where “there were more cows than people,” he said. “It’s such a rural area

that you don’t get exposed to much. You wonder what there is to do in life.”

In fact, he said, few of his peers aspired to become professionals of any sort.

“I think I had 80 kids in my class. And I think eight of us went on to college.”

He started out at the Newhouse School at Syracuse University, studying advertising. But he'd been there less than a full year when he thought back on the battering he got in the eighth grade and focused his attention on law.

Despite the Perry Mason moment that started it all, Gutchess got to Cornell law school with no idea of what kind of law he wanted to practice.

"My first year in law school I thought, 'Oh my God! I've made the biggest mistake of my life.' I thought, 'I've got to quit this now and take the loss and just move on.'"

An internship in the Big Apple turned him around. Then, in his second year, he took an advocacy class. "That's when I got really excited and thought this can be a lot of fun."

After graduation, he went to work in the litigation department at one of Philadelphia's oldest and largest law firms, Dechert Price & Rhodes (now Dechert). He wasn't, by his own description, "the superstar associate." But a couple of years after starting, he got to handle a case in federal court that reminded him of that first mock trial.

He didn't get kicked, he said, but he did get to debunk an expert witness's claims during cross-examination.

"It was a bit like what happened with O.J. and the glove. It didn't fit," he said. "Remarkably the opposing counsel came up to me on the way out and shook my hand and said, 'Wow, that was fantastic. Great job!' And my supervising partner came over and gave me a big hug and said 'That was one of the best crosses I've ever seen.'"

He was hooked.

In 1995, he went back to New York City. He worked for the international firm of Chadbourne & Parke for a couple of years. Then he joined Hunton & Williams. That led him, after a few years, to Miami. And, a few years later, to Bilzin Sumberg.

Branching out

Then, in 2016, after all the years with big firms, he decided he wanted to do something different—not just start his own firm, but a different kind of firm.

"I thought, am I going to be excited here or in any big firm for the next 12 years, or 15, or 20, or however long?"

The answer, he said, was, "No."

So, along with two partners, he launched AXS Law Group in Wynwood.

The idea from the beginning was, "we're really just trying to re-invent or re-imagine the whole notion of working in a law firm."

To that end, he said, they don't call younger lawyers

"associates." They give them shares from the start. And everyone works in a space "with a layout much more like a tech company," he said, with clear dividers, a kitchen and a couch in the middle. An outdoor conference room with a movie screen is under construction on the rooftop.

And they deliberately focus a lot of attention on providing legal services for entrepreneurs and startups—everything from tech companies to restaurants—that they take equity or partnership positions in.

"It's really more the concept of getting involved on the ground floor of these businesses and building them up," he said. "Providing legal services along the way, but also acting as a general partner in the business as well. And that's been one of our founding principles."

Jeff Gutchess

Born: 1967, Cortland, New York

Spouse: Valentina

Child: Arabella

Education: Cornell University, J.D., 1992; Syracuse University, B.A., 1989.

Experience: Partner, AXS Law Group, 2016-present; Partner, Bilzin Sumberg, 2012-2016; Partner, Hunton & Williams, 1997-2012; Associate, Chadbourne & Parke, 1995-1997; Associate, Dechert Price & Rhodes, 1992-1995.