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The Money Maker

STORY BY SEAN CLINKSCALES • PHOTOS BY JOHN SANDS

It's a bright clear Monday afternoon at The Buckhead Bread Company & Corner Café. White puffy clouds fill the crystal blue skyline. Shiny, golden rays from the sun warm the skin. While laughter and great conversations reverberate throughout the bustling eatery, tension is mounting on the Eastern seaboard as Superstorm Sandy is inching its way towards the inevitable fate of the citizens who reside on this side of the world.

There is some tension rising in my spirit today as well. I'm about to interview Mr. Ted Lake of The Lake Law Firm in Atlanta. Someone once said that 99% of lawyers give the rest a bad name. Someone also once said you don't want a lawyer until you need one. That is the prejudice that the majority of society has about attorneys. I must admit, a good piece of me is leaning towards the negative stereotype of lawyers as I await the arrival of our cover story, Mr. Lake. I know I shouldn't. It's not like I haven't used the services of an attorney several times in my life already. Each time the lawyers I used were professional, courteous, informative and helpful. Quite truthfully, most attorneys are honest, hard-working individuals who take their work very seriously.

When I take a serious look at the career of an attorney, it is difficult work. There is a beautiful dance that a great lawyer must undertake and understand in dealing with the objectivity of the laws of the land and subjectivity of the people (juries) who interpret them. They have a multitude of jobs that they must juggle when dealing with their clients and opposition before, during and after any case.

I believe it is human nature that focuses on the negative and so when it comes to lawyers, our nature pinpoints on the money-grubbing, unethical attorney looking to get paid and win at all costs. It's not helping that some personal injury lawyers have become the source of questionable ethics. Billboard and commercial advertisements abound with the promise of high dollar settlements for your case. This marketing tactic only adds to the negative perception of the legal profession, as it makes them appear as ethical as snake oil salesmen.

Additionally, most of us have heard the horror stories about attorneys collaborating back room deals with physicians and

chiropractors. In this instance, an attorney wanting to win a case involving a car accident or injury on the job might send his client to a "special" doctor that will validate and even overemphasize the level of injury. The doctor testifies in court in support of the plaintiff, giving the attorney and case strong credibility.

So here comes Mr. Lake, bouncing into the place very well dressed with a topcoat. I already know what he looks like from his photo-shoot. He is a fairly tall guy, definitely taller than I am. He greets me with a firm handshake and genuinely bright smile.

We take a booth next to a mom with her kids. The one little girl looks to be about a year old. She fixes her gaze on us, smiles and makes an incomprehensible statement. His eyes brighten and widen as pulls out his iPhone.

"Wanna see my puppy?", he asks sweetly. "This is my little puppy," he tells her.

"Kids are so cool."

I feel a latent sadness in that statement. He explains to me that met his second wife Kim when he was 33 and she was 32. Neither of them have kids. He was just starting his law practice when they met and married, dragged her along (not kicking and screaming) and just hadn't got there. Of course he asks me if I have any children and I elaborate about my daughter Anastasia and the beautiful being that she is. This person, with her own individual spirit and character is still a part of me and my attempt to describe that feeling is truly indescribable.

Immediately my tension and my walls come down. I already knew I was being an asshole for my prejudice, but seeing his vulnerability really stuck the knife in.

We happily share info on mistakes with exes and our current status. "Everybody gets a mulligan", he jokes. After finding out we both have a lot of women in our lives I tell him of a saying that men with a lot of women in their lives have a lot of patience.

"I'd like to think that I do. In my business you have to." He tells his paralegals all the time to "kill 'em with kindness".





tremendously helped him with risk assessment and management throughout his life.

In his junior year he got an internship working on Capitol Hill with New York Senator Alfonse D'Amato. From that experience, he really fell in love with politics and the law. "Having a law degree just made sense." In his senior year wanted to go back to DC and work on the hill but the political science department said no...he had already done that. They had never in the life of the university sponsored one person twice. That wasn't going to stop him. He went over to the Urban Studies department and asked them to sponsor him to work on the hill. They knew that he had already gone, but said if he wrote a prospectus of why he wanted to go and what he wanted to do and they get it approved he could go. He did just that, got back to the hill his senior year and worked on the other side of the isle with House of Representatives

Congressman Richard Lehman of California. "With D'Amato it was 90 employees. With Lehman it was eight of us. It was a great experience to see how both machines work."

When time came to pursue his law degree, he went to the University of Georgia from 1986-89. "It was great," he exclaims. "All of my classmates were first in their class from their respective schools."

When did you start your practice?

"I came straight to Atlanta after law school." While his friends went to work for large firms, he joined a small law firm in Paulding County where he immediately starting trying cases in all spectrums (divorce, criminal, probate, real estate). "After about two and a half years there I moved into Buckhead and searched for a new job."

He landed one with personal injury lawyer Robert N. Susko. "Robert was looking for a litigator to try his cases. Robert said he was looking for someone young and hungry who had court experience under their belt. I told him I was his man." Robert liked him right away. Robert was from Pittsburgh as well. They both played tennis. Everything clicked. "It was really good. My buddies were still stuck in the office doing research and had not seen the inside of a court room."

He continued doing divorce and criminal, building his clientele. About the fifth year of working with Robert he dropped the divorce and criminal, strictly focusing on personal injury, workers compensation. Between 1997-98 things had ran their course. He could not work out a partnership agreement with Robert and went out on his own.

That's when you met your wife Kim?

"Yes. That's when I met Kim." He explains that a young lawyer friend had just passed the bar exam and wanted to celebrate. Instead of the normal haunts he wanted to go way out to Kennesaw

Our waitress comes to take our order. I get a Chicken breast salad club and coleslaw. He's on a low-carb diet so even though we are in a restaurant with the word bread in their name and he is salivating for some, he cannot have any. He asks the waitress for her help in choosing the best dish on the menu.

He orders the crab cake sandwich without the bun and steamed vegetables as I ask where life started for him. I find out that he was born in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania and raised in the gritty blue-collar city of Pittsburgh during the 70s. Backdrop for the stories of playwright August Wilson, Pittsburgh in the 70's burst at the seams with people grinding out a living with two or three jobs, men with calloused hands greet each other with ferocious slaps to the back, bear-hugs and the Steelers Bradshaw, Swann, Stallworth, Franco' Harris are gods on the grid-iron. "They were winning superbowl when I was a little kid," he reminisces. Even though I have a healthy respect for the Steelers, I was born and raised an Eagles fan; they are my rivals. The feeling was mutual. "My grandfather being from Bethlehem was a huge fan of the Phillies and Eagles. The year before he passed, he saw the Phillies win the World Series and the Eagles make it to the Superbowl."

He was 13 when the family then made the trek to Atlanta and made it their home. He has traveled extensively and thinks that Atlanta is the greatest city in the world.

What made him choose law?

"Freshman year. Taking political science classes, my professors told me delving in that direction (political science), you'll want and need a law background."

He went to Furman "Paladins" University in Greenville, South Carolina. His father and grandfather went to Duke and wanted him to be a Blue Devil, but you get the sense that he always went his own path. Furman was a smaller school and he was able to focus on his studies. Ted was a whiz at math and I believe

to a place called Cowboys. It was ladies night at the place. He was intrigued but felt out of his element; especially wearing a crisp shirt and pants, sockless with Italian loafers on. "A girl is walking around selling shooters and she seemed out of place as well. This was Kim." He found out she had come from Philadelphia and was in-between flight attendant jobs trying to get a position with Delta. He gave her his business card. "She called me three days later like she was suppose to and three months later we got married in Vegas."

Kim has been right by his side since the genesis of his own firm in April of 1998. "Kim can do it all. She is a former private investigator. She can prepare and file lawsuits. Interview witnesses, take photographs, work on discovery and any administrative needs. Clients love her. She always promotes the business. A great partner makes you better." I agree.

"Kim is an amazing woman who helps me on all levels of my business and life." He delves into the story about Kim at his dad's funeral. "Kim had been asking me for a Mercedes G Wagon," he quips. "I'm telling her that it's too much, too frivolous and she wasn't going to use it for what it was made for." A plant in Austria custom makes this vehicle for Mercedes and only make 300 a year for the planet.

Without realizing it, Kim kicked him in the heart. At his dad's funeral, Kim was a Godsend. "She really kept my family together during all of the arrangements," he recalls. "Seeing her in action really showed me why I married her."

He made the decision that day to get the car of her dreams, but no one in the Southeast had one. He calls the Mercedes Benz of



Buckhead dealership and one of the sales associates tells him that one is coming into the Florida port. It's been designated for another dealership but he can get it. He asks what color it is: black on black with all the trimmings - exactly what she wanted. Ted negotiates the deal and gets it for her. It gets in town while he is at his office with his wife, two paralegals and their puppy dog. He tells them to get a big red bow and put



it on top. He gets a purple (her favorite color) sign made at Kinkos that says “Reserved for Kim Lake” and takes over to the dealership. They place it in a position so you could only see the word reserve as the cleaned up the car. He rushes back to the office and shuffles everyone off to Starbucks. Kim gets a frustrating call as they pass the Starbucks that they go to that distracts her as they make there way to the dealership. Perfect. Still frustrated she asks why are they at the dealership. He says he just wants to look at a car real quick. They go inside, she gets off the phone and the sales associate he worked with pretends that he doesn’t know Ted.

“Have you seen these new G Wagons?” the sales associate ask Kim.

“Oh No, my husband says that I’m not allowed to have one,” she replies. Ted is loving it at this point - she has no idea what is going on.

The car is right in the middle of the showroom floor with the bow and the sign and Ted convinces her to walk over to look at it. She sees the “Reserved” portion of the sign.

“I know I’m not the one to really buy one, but Kim you should check out the interior,” Ted insists. He opens the drivers side door and she sees the rest of the sign that says “For Kim Lake”. Her mouth drops, and tears well up in her eyes.

“So she has been enjoying the car for four months now,” he tells me. We joke he can make a couple of mulligan’s in life now.

Your favorite cigar brand?

“Gurkha is my favorite brand. The 15 year Cellar Reserve is my top cigar.” He used to smoke Padrón and Rocky Patel, but when Gurkha found his palate - that was it.

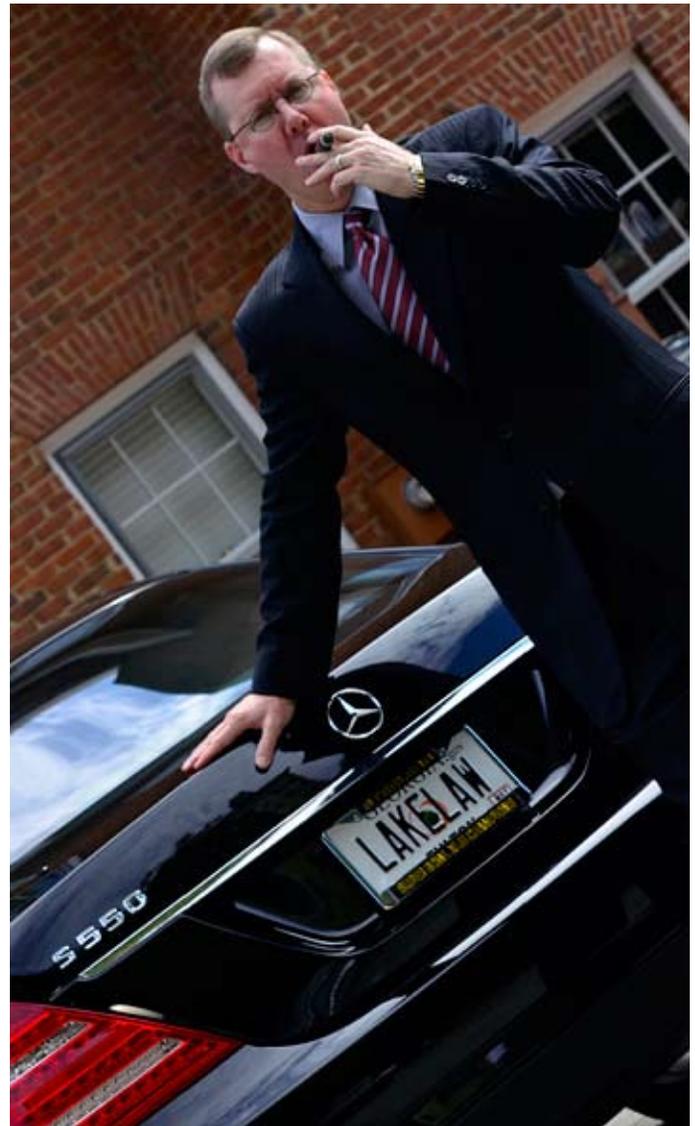
You call yourself the “Money Maker”. Where do you draw the line on how far you will go to make that happen?

“I’m very big on ethics,” Ted firmly states. “Some clients would ask if I can pay them if they refer their sister or whoever to me. I tell them flat out ‘No’. You cannot gift anyone for referring a case to you – not a tinbox of cookies, nothing. I’m not going to risk my law license to have someone be a client.”

He doesn’t mention what law firms, but he has had clients that have said that they had been contacted by a firm or their investigator(s) and offered them money.

“I tell them it’s unethical and you don’t want to go with that attorney or firm because a lot of the insurance companies have them on a ‘hit list’.” He also explains that unethical lawyers promise people the world and either it doesn’t happen for them or overbilling eats up the “big money” their clients do get.

Ted does no TV or billboard advertising. He is not the snake-oil salesman that personal injury lawyers are made out to be



through the few that have tarnished the profession. Previous clients refer him because of his work ethic and the sincere fight he puts up for them. “The average person doesn’t know the rules and regulations when it comes to personal injury and workers compensation. That’s what I’m here for,” he quips.

How else do you build your money?

“I’m pretty well versed in the stock exchange and I read a lot of Jim Cramer’s books on investing.” He also invests in residential properties.

As we wrap his interview, I can see and feel why life is good for Mr. Lake. He learned to take calculated risks very early in life while others took the “normal” road. He’s a good, genuine man that enjoys life and loves his wife immensely. He’s sensitive and compassionate to people across the board. Personally, he’s one of the coolest guys I’ve met on the planet.

While the public may not be quite ready to elevate lawyers to hero status, I intend to make it a personal goal not to prejudge anyone, especially lawyers.