

# PORTICO

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JANUARY 2011

## Portico10

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# PORTICO 10

Local judges chose the inaugural PORTICO 10, impressive, up-and-coming Jackson area lawyers.

PHOTOS BY BILL JACKSON

**NAME:** Andrea La'Verne Edney  
**FIRM:** Mississippi Volunteer Lawyers Project  
**YEARS IN PRACTICE:** 14  
**PRIMARY AREA OF PRACTICE:** Family Law

**EDUCATION:** I graduated from Mississippi College School of Law in 1996; Alcorn State University in 1988; and Simmons High School in Hollandale in 1984.

**GREATEST CHALLENGE:** The greatest challenge I face today as a lawyer is trying to convince lawyers to step outside of their comfort zones to assist indigent citizens of our state with their legal problems. These attorneys are asked to provide legal help to people who are unable to pay for their services. Additionally, many attorneys are asked to handle cases that are outside of their areas of expertise. My job is to alleviate the fears by equipping volunteers with the resources and the support they need.

**GREATEST ACHIEVEMENT:** Having the privilege to serve as General Counsel of the Mississippi Volunteer Lawyers Project. This opportunity has allowed me to share a portion of the tremendous blessings God has given me.

**ADVICE:** Know that success is not measured by how much stuff you accumulate. You are only successful when you know you have been blessed enough to share your blessings and you do just that.

**PATH TO LEADERSHIP:** I am where I am today because of so many people God allowed to cross my path. There are so many people who were at the right place at the right time, starting with my mom and dad who instilled in me and my 13 siblings that we could do anything through Christ. I have been extremely blessed to have so many people who encouraged me and believed in me when I did not believe in myself.







**NAME:** John F. Hawkins

**FIRM:** Hawkins, Stracener & Gibson, PLLC

**PRIMARY AREAS OF**

**PRACTICE:** Our firm primarily represents people who have been damaged or injured through no fault of their own in a variety of cases.

**YEARS IN PRACTICE:** 17

**EDUCATION:** I graduated from Tulane Law School, Cum Laude, in 1993, and Millsaps College in 1990.

**GREATEST CHALLENGE:** One of the greatest challenges is managing the business of our small firm—with offices in Jackson and Bay St. Louis—while simultaneously doing our best to advocate the interests of our clients and keep their cases moving as quickly through the system as possible. We are fortunate to have hard-working lawyers and staff members committed to the causes and rights of the people we represent.

**GREATEST ACHIEVEMENT:** I would have to say that my greatest achievement to date was my involvement in the legal work our firm accomplished on behalf of victims of sex abuse committed by members of the clergy. I know that litigation was very controversial here in Mississippi and I was only one of several lawyers advocating the rights of the victims we had the privilege of representing, however, getting to know our clients in the context of that emotional litigation and helping them to hold the bad guys responsible for their actions was something that I will always be thankful to have been a part of.

**ADVICE:** Work hard on every client's claim and prepare for every task you are responsible for completing as if you are the lead lawyer who will ultimately be responsible for the closing argument at the end of the case.

**PATH TO LEADERSHIP:** I have had the privilege of working for and with some great lawyers and law partners, and I have learned from them every day of my practice.





**NAME:** Walter Thomas Johnson  
**FIRM:** Watkins & Eager PLLC  
**PRIMARY AREA OF PRACTICE:** Litigation. I concentrate on the defense of physicians and pharmaceutical companies as well as manufacturers of other products  
**YEARS IN PRACTICE:** 20

**EDUCATION:** I received a certification in radiologic technology/nuclear medicine from University of Mississippi Medical Center; Juris Doctor, Mississippi College School of Law; Bachelor of Arts, Tougaloo College

**GREATEST CHALLENGE:** My greatest challenge is balancing my personal and professional life.

**GREATEST ACHIEVEMENT:** My greatest achievement has been to have earned the respect of my law partners and other member of The Bar.

**ADVICE:** Be honest and forthright in all of your endeavors and never compromise your integrity.

**PATH TO LEADERSHIP:** Fate

**NAME:** Jody E. Owens II  
**FIRM:** Butler Snow  
**AREAS OF PRACTICE:** Insurance, Transportation, and Tort defense.  
**YEARS IN PRACTICE:** 5

**EDUCATION:** I graduated from Howard University School of Law in 2006; Jackson State University, Summa Cum laude in 2003.

**GREATEST CHALLENGE:** The greatest challenge I face today as a lawyer is to continue to live by the words of Charles Hamilton Houston "A lawyer's either a social engineer or.... A parasite on society." As lawyers, we have a responsibility to try to give back and use our profession to make a positive difference in our local communities and in the lives of the less fortunate.

**GREATEST ACHIEVEMENT:** My greatest achievement to date as a lawyer is to be in a position to do pro

bono work with a variety of organizations while having a demanding law practice at a large defense firm. Specifically, one of those pro bono opportunities was in my capacity as a Special Prosecutor for the Hinds County District Attorney's Office where I was able to successfully prosecute an individual who had murdered the mother of his children in the presence of his two daughters, who were too young to testify against their father. Although the Defendant was tried and convicted, his conviction was overturned by the MS Supreme Court. The case had several complicated issues, but ultimately justice was served.

**ADVICE:** I would tell young lawyers just starting out not to be discouraged by a sluggish economy and a lack of job opportunities, but rather focus on building relationships and doing the best with whatever opportunities that are available to them. In time, hard work and dedication will always create more opportunities regardless of where you start out.

**PATH TO LEADERSHIP:** What led me to where I am today is a desire to make a difference using the law as a vehicle to influence change. I would not be here without my faith and the help of countless mentors and family members, who always supported me and wanted to see me succeed. Young lawyers should identify older lawyers and ask them for mentorship and guidance. You can learn a lot from the mistakes of others and I have been blessed to have some very wise mentors in my life.

*On January 3rd, Jody will begin a new chapter as Executive Director/Managing Attorney for the Mississippi office of the Southern Poverty Law Center.*

**NAME:** Amanda K. Jones  
**FIRM/POSITION:** I serve as Counsel to Governor Haley Barbour  
**PRIMARY AREA OF PRACTICE:** I advise Governor Barbour on legal,

policy and legislative matters.

**YEARS IN PRACTICE:** 14

**EDUCATION:** I graduated from the University of Mississippi School of Law, Juris Doctor, in 1996; Mississippi State University, Bachelor of Arts in Political Science in 1992.

**GREATEST CHALLENGE:** In my 14 years of law practice, I worked for and alongside some of the smartest and most talented lawyers in the state and, I believe, country. For the last two years, I have worked for one of the greatest governors that the State of Mississippi has ever had. I think the challenge I face is improving on that.

**GREATEST ACHIEVEMENT:** In 2005, I became President of the Mississippi Bar Young Lawyers Division (YLD). Soon thereafter, Hurricane Katrina devastated the Mississippi Gulf Coast. Consequently, it was my responsibility to organize and lead the Mississippi Disaster Legal Assistance Program, coordinating hundreds of volunteer lawyers in more than forty disaster-declared counties. Ultimately, over 6,600 disaster victims received free legal advice from our volunteer lawyers, either face to face at FEMA Disaster Recovery Centers or over the phone. In many cases, this program was the only available legal resource for thousands of needy people to get answers to critical legal questions.

**ADVICE:** First: Pay off any school debt quickly. This relieves you of a big burden; otherwise, you may make career choices based on what you need to make, not what you want to do. Second, get to know your neighbors and get involved in your community. Third, volunteer to serve on committees in both local and state bars; this gives you the opportunity to know your colleagues. Lastly, work hard, follow through, practice law with integrity, and always act professionally even when your opposing counsel does not.



**NAME:** David Pharr

**FIRM:** Bradley Arant Boult  
Cummings LLP

**PRIMARY AREA OF PRACTICE:**  
Litigation

**YEARS IN PRACTICE:** 12

**EDUCATION:** I graduated from the University of Mississippi School of Law, Juris Doctor, in 1997; Millsaps College, Bachelor of Arts, Psychology and English, in 1992.

**GREATEST CHALLENGE:** The legal profession is in a transition brought on by economic upheaval. One of the great benefits of this historic change is a renewed emphasis on client service. While highly responsive service has always distinguished successful lawyers, it is now a threshold requirement for building a law practice.

**GREATEST ACHIEVEMENT:** I think my greatest achievement has been volunteer work at the Jackson Chamber of Commerce. Our city is in a period of exciting transformation and improvement and that work has given me opportunities to contribute directly to solutions for the kinds of problems that inevitably occur during such times. My primary interests have been talent retention and fostering a better environment for start-up entrepreneurship in our city. These have been extremely rewarding projects.

**ADVICE:** Find an ethical mentor and work as hard as you can. Those two goals are enough when you are just starting out. After a couple of years of working hard enough to appreciate what this means, start thinking more about a work-life balance. The solution is different for everyone but for me it has meant pouring myself into work and client needs and finding the same level of energy for family and volunteer work.

**PATH TO LEADERSHIP:** In eighth grade, I wanted to become a lawyer to help people and try to make a positive difference. I had great professors in college and law school who helped me discover what I really wanted to do. I have worked with many outstanding lawyers and judges who have inspired me to keep at it.







**NAME:** Christopher Lamar Wansley

**FIRM:** Balch & Bingham LLP

**PRIMARY AREA OF PRACTICE:**

Litigation and Government Relations

**YEARS IN PRACTICE:** 7

**EDUCATION:** I graduated from the University of Mississippi School of Law in May 2003; Jackson State University in May 2000.

**GREATEST CHALLENGE:** My greatest challenge is meeting and/or surpassing the goals and standards I have set for myself. As a young lawyer, it is becoming increasingly difficult to find opportunities to litigate complex issues and obtain trial experience.

**GREATEST ACHIEVEMENT:** I have had the opportunity to represent many Fortune 500 companies with litigation and government relation matters. However, my greatest achievement has been my pro bono work serving the citizens of Jackson in the areas of child custody, criminal matters and estate planning.

In furtherance of serving the greater statewide community, I am assisting with the development of a community foundation that will improve underserved areas in East Central Mississippi.

**ADVICE:** Do not give up. Being a legal professional is difficult. Do all you can to learn the profession and hone your skills. Seek mentorship from seasoned professionals. Find the proper balance between work, family and community. Remember you have been blessed with a gift as a lawyer and you therefore have an obligation to give back to the community. Only then will you be fulfilled in your professional life.

**PATH TO LEADERSHIP:** Determination, perseverance, and being under the tutelage of many gifted lawyers who have paved the way and established a blueprint of success in the legal profession that I have been able to follow.



**NAME:** Michael J. Bentley  
**FIRM:** Bradley Arant Boulton  
Cummings LLP

**PRIMARY AREA OF PRACTICE:**  
Appeals; Commercial Litigation  
**YEARS IN PRACTICE:** 3

**EDUCATION:** I graduated from  
Mississippi College School of Law;  
Millsaps College, Bachelor of Arts  
in Political Science and minor in  
History.

**GREATEST CHALLENGE:** I think  
the greatest challenge that lawyers  
face today is finding the time and  
outlets for doing the "non-lawyer"  
things that lawyers are rightfully  
expected to do by the community  
at large. When my grandfather,  
Lawrence Rabb, came out of law  
school and started his practice in  
Meridian 60 years ago, his neighbors  
expected him to be more than just a  
"lawyer." They looked to him to take  
a leadership role in the community,  
to speak out on critical civic and  
political issues, and to take care that  
people that truly needed legal aid  
got it, whether they could pay for his  
services or not. I believe people have  
those same expectations of attorneys  
today – or they should have them.

**GREATEST ACCOMPLISHMENT:**  
I would have to say that my proudest  
accomplishment as an attorney is  
having served as a law clerk for Judge  
Leslie Southwick at the Fifth Circuit  
Court of Appeals.

**ADVICE:** Two things. First, find a  
good lawyer to be your mentor or,  
even better, several good lawyers.  
Watch them, talk to them, ask them  
questions – learn the profession  
from them. The truly great lawyers  
of today learned to practice law  
by working with and emulating  
the truly great lawyers of previous  
generations. Second, become active  
in the State Bar Association and  
your local bar organization. Bar  
associations are the public face of  
our profession. Their rules and the  
practices they encourage affects the  
perception of lawyers.



**NAME:** Ashley N. Wicks  
**FIRM:** Watkins Ludlam Winter &  
Stennis, P.A.  
**PRIMARY AREA OF  
PRACTICE:** Taxation, Business  
Planning and Operations, Tax Credit  
Financing, Real Estate Transactions  
and Economic Development  
**YEARS IN PRACTICE:** 5

**EDUCATION:** I received a Masters  
of Law in Taxation from the  
University of Alabama Law School,  
August 2010; Tulane University Law  
School, Juris Doctor in May 2005

**GREATEST CHALLENGE:** I  
think that the greatest challenge  
that I have faced as a lawyer is  
balancing clients' expectations,

firm's expectations, community  
involvement, my development as  
a lawyer, maintaining relationships  
with family and friends and having a  
personal life.

**GREATEST ACHIEVEMENT:** My  
greatest achievements are receiving  
the Jackson Young Lawyers Pro  
Bono Service Award and completing  
my LLM in Taxation while working  
full-time for the firm was a GREAT  
accomplishment for me.  
As far as my practice, I'm very proud  
to have worked on the mixed use  
building at Jackson State University.  
JSU is my alma mater and my blood  
bleeds blue and white. I was excited  
to work on a project that not only  
benefits those that are currently





attending Jackson State University, but the surrounding community as well. I want to see my alma mater grow and thrive.

**PATH TO LEADERSHIP:** I think it's a combination of things – life circumstances, my determination, hard work, God, supportive and loving parents and sisters and good friends and mentors.

A lot of great people have impacted my life: My parents, Tony and Marilyn Wicks, and my sisters, Tonitric and Lacey Wicks are very supportive, keeping me humbled and constantly making me laugh. The list of people could go on and on.

**NAME:** Matt Allen

**FIRM:** Brunini, Grantham, Grower, & Hewes, PLLC

**PRIMARY AREA OF PRACTICE:**

My primary area of practice is civil litigation with an emphasis on matters relating to personal injury, product liability, medical malpractice defense, and commercial disputes.

**YEARS IN PRACTICE:** 6

**EDUCATION:** I graduated from The University of Texas School of Law, Juris Doctor in 2004; Millsaps College, Else School of Management, Masters of Business Administration in 2001; Mississippi State University, Bachelor of Arts in 2000; and Jackson Academy.

**GREATEST CHALLENGE:** Time management would be the greatest challenge. Being a lawyer often lends itself to many ways in which to be involved in the community and the profession, so balancing work, volunteerism, and family takes constant effort.

**GREATEST ACHIEVEMENT:** My most significant accomplishment as a lawyer involved defending welding rod manufacturers in what was scheduled to be the first trial of thousands of welding rod lawsuits filed in multi-district federal litigation. Our team was able to have the lawsuit dismissed. This occurred because the team obtained videotape evidence that the plaintiff was performing a number of activities that he had claimed under oath he could not do because of his alleged condition. As a member of that team, I was the person who found and contacted the person with information that the plaintiff was indeed performing these activities.

**ADVICE:** Watch, listen, and learn from those who have been down the road before you. Find a mentor or two. Most lawyers will readily lend sought-after advice to those coming behind them. And as to those colleagues who are starting out with you, get to know them.

## CHOOSING THE PORTICO 10

SPECIAL THANKS TO WAYNE DRINKWATER, ROBERT GIBBS, ALAN LANGE, CHUCK MCRAE, JIM ROSENBLATT AND REBECCA WIGGS FOR JUDGING THE COMPETITION.

EACH JUDGE WAS ASKED TO NOMINATE 5 LAWYERS (GRADUATING BETWEEN 1990 – 2010). ONCE WE RECEIVED ALL NOMINATIONS, WE SENT THE ENTIRE LIST BACK TO EACH JUDGE AND ASKED THAT THEY SELECT THEIR TOP 10.

THE CRITERIA FOR THEIR NOMINATIONS WAS BASED ON THE FOLLOWING:

–ACCOMPLISHMENTS WHILE PRACTICING

–COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT

–EDUCATION AND ANY SPECIAL AWARDS RECEIVED WHILE PRACTICING

–NOTABLE CASES