

Thomas W. James: Up & Coming Lawyers 2011

Attorney, Michigan Auto Law, Farmington Hills

Litigation

Michigan State University College of Law, 2005

When it comes to cases that are important to Thomas W. James, size truly doesn't matter.

He took a case soon after he started working at Michigan Auto Law, and to this day he calls it one of the most important cases of his career. As a brand new associate, he had only recently graduated from Michigan State University College of Law.

One of the senior partners' clients was having some trouble with a creditor who was harassing him and demanding payment. The creditor wouldn't tell the client what he'd bought or borrowed — it could have been a television or a sofa or a pony for all he knew.

"This was a nice client, and a good case. I said I'd take it," James said.

It certainly wasn't the amount of money involved that piqued his interest, said James, who five years into his tenure has already worked on several multimillion-dollar cases.

In this case, the amount of money on the line was a mere \$1,600.

When he asked what the \$1,600 purchase was, opposing counsel wouldn't tell him either.

"So I discovered the hell out of him," James said. "I went nuts on it for \$1,600. It was the principle."

The judge awarded him summary disposition and \$2,600 in fees, which James said added up to far less than minimum wage, considering the amount of time he put into the case.

But that doesn't matter. Whether it was this case, or *Broeren v. Bates*, in which he helped his firm win a \$5.6 million verdict for a client who had been run over by a pickup truck — the largest reported auto negligence verdict of 2008 — the principle is the same, James said.

"They're all important to the client" he said. "But to me it was the notion of standing up for people, for individuals."

In 2010, he helped win a \$3.5 million verdict in *Fairley v. Schiber Trucking Co.*, a case in which the plaintiff was seriously injured after his minivan was rear-ended by a semi-truck and pushed into the path of an oncoming truck. The insurance company's \$1 million offer to settle was more than just unacceptable to James. It was unfair.

The firm credits James' questioning of lay witnesses as being a major factor in the verdict.



Thomas W. James
Photo by Mark Bialek

What age were you when you first knew you wanted to be a lawyer?

I was a little older than most. I was 31.

What advice would the you of today give the you of your first week of law school?

Work on your writing skills. I hadn't had to do a lot of writing after college and before law school. The transition to writing that required a lot of analysis made for a tough first semester.

If you weren't a lawyer, what career would you choose?

I'd go back into sales. I'd like to be doing something that's Internet-based.

"Our clients are victimized in crashes, then five times, 10 times, 50 times, they are victimized in litigation," he said. "They are called greedy, and they are called liars, and they are accused of trying to cheat the insurance company or the system, and it's disturbing.

"And this time, I got to prove to the creditor, 'No, my client is not the cheat. You're the cheat.'"

James is a member of the American Association for Justice, Michigan Association for Justice, Wayne County Bar Association, Washtenaw County Bar Association, and the Michigan State University College of Law, Alumni Board of Directors.

By Carol Lundberg