

# Second generation trial lawyer took lessons from dad to sustain legacy

By **STEPHANIE KLEIN**  
*Special to The Missouri Trial Attorney*

Cooper Mach carries with him the kind of reputation he can't take credit for building – one built on the foundation of his father's 43 years in the Kansas City legal community at Popham Law Firm.

Known for his fairness, calm presence and family-driven philosophy, the younger Mach blends the technical preparation of a seasoned litigator with the grounded values instilled by his parents.

And while he would be the first to say his father led the way, he also says the journey to this career was unexpected, both for him and his parents. Still, every new milestone in his practice often feels like a fresh tribute to his family's legacy.

**Your dad worked at Popham for 40-plus years, and you've said that he played a big role in your career. Would you share a little bit about what you saw in his work and how it shaped your journey to this point?**

You know, when I decided to go to law school, everyone was like, "Oh well, of course," because my dad was an attorney, and my mom's actually an attorney as well. As the son of two attorneys, everyone's like, "Oh yeah, you were totally destined to do this."

But at no point growing up was I pushed towards law. My parents always said, "Do what will make you happy." My brother's an English teacher. My sister works marketing for the Royals. I was always planning to be an anchor on SportsCenter, but when ESPN didn't call right after graduation I decided law school was the next best thing. I went to law school because I saw an opportunity to help people, an opportunity to use what I believed were skills that I had – for good. And I also saw the opportunity to provide for myself and my family in a way that I saw my parents provide for us.

Seeing my dad as a lawyer growing up, it's funny – I knew he was a lawyer, but I didn't really know what he did, and I think part of that was because he was so good at leaving work at work. I never really noticed how good of a job he did at this until I actually got into practice. The nature of our job as litigators is to always be working toward the best solution – but never knowing if we have it until the case is resolved. Our minds never get a chance to rest, and I never realized how good my dad was at leaving his job at

the office until I started practicing with him 10 years ago.

But now, I understand how crazy busy he was, but he never let that affect his ability to come home and just be "dad." I never knew that as a kid, because he left his work at work. And I think, after practicing 10 years myself, what I've realized is, he was able to do that because the way he practiced gave him peace of mind.



**SCOTT MACH**



**COOPER MACH**

The amount of people – on both sides of the bar – who have asked if I'm Scott Mach's son and tell me what a great attorney, but more importantly a great person he is, speaks volumes to how he ran his practice. And that's what's important to me to carry forward from my dad. And it's why I'm thankful I get to represent the injured party. I know that all we're doing is telling the story. I think that Dad was able to come home and leave work at the office because he knew he was doing the right thing for folks who truly needed help.

And that is very, very important to me as I continue in my own practice. Sure, I'm always going to be worried about if I did enough at the office that day, but I never have to worry – "did I compromise my morals today?"

So I really learned from him to do what you can for your clients, and do it in the right way, and you'll be able to sleep well at night. And I think giving people the representation that they deserve really allows you to practice with a clear mind and clear conscience.

**You got a significant trial win in your first jury trial case as first chair. Can you share more about the case?**

Right, so like you said, it was my first time as first chair. It was against the City of Kansas City. Our client Jeanne had worked nearly 20 years repairing traffic lights and lost her job in 2017 after being medically cleared to return from disability. The city refused, called her a liability, left her unpaid, then terminated her.

After a few hours of waiting for the jury to come back, the judge let us know that they had reached a verdict. And my heart's racing, the jury is still up in the room, and Judge



Cooper and Scott Mach, enjoying baseball through the years, and at the younger Mach's law school graduation.



John Torrence says, "Attorneys, will you please approach the bench? There's an issue." And, of course, my heart sinks. I'm thinking – "gosh, Jeanne, we tried this case, and now we're going to have to retry it."

We approach the bench and Judge Torrance says, "The jury reached a verdict, and in this verdict that they returned, there's an issue because they didn't put down a number, they put down an equation."

After a brief discussion, we sent it back so they could include a specific number in this field. So I'm walking back to the table to join my co-counsel, Bert Braud, and our client, and I'm doing the math in my head, thinking, okay, \$13,000, that equation looks good. I'm thinking, "okay, \$13,000 – still got a shot at punitive damages, maybe we'll get our fees." And then I think, "no, that's not right... closer to \$130,000 maybe."

And then I sit down and realize – I still missed a zero – the equation was closer to \$1,300,000.

### Can you describe the moments leading up to this one?

So, it's my first time carrying a trial, my first time being all the way in charge. Our client is the sweetest lady in the world. She has a case against the City of Kansas City. She worked in the traffic safety division for a long time, starting in 1999 until she lost her job in 2017. Jeanne gave nearly 20 years of her life to the city.

Originally, we weren't sure what was going to happen. We made a big demand, and the city came back with "not a chance." So we said, "Okay, fine, we'll try it and see what the jury thinks."

That's always the idea – don't discount your case just because someone tells you it's no good, because you never know. Obviously, I believed in our case and our facts. Jeanne had been in a physically demanding position for

almost 20 years. She was working manual labor on traffic signals, drilling light posts into the ground, fixing wires, helping electricians hang street lights. She suffered a carpal tunnel injury requiring surgery and extensive recovery.

When she tried to return after getting medical clearance, the city treated her like a piece of equipment, essentially saying, "You've run your course, we're going to just kind of discard you."

Jeanne had had a couple of workers' compensation cases, different types of carpal tunnel issues, and she went off on disability once. This time, she had a doctor who cleared her to come back, gave her the note, and she gave it to the city. And our theory, and what turned out to be true to the jury too, is the city basically had told her, "Jeanne, we are sorry, we appreciate your service, but you're too much of a liability. Now, even though you've been cleared, we don't really believe that the doctor thinks that you can do the job."

And obviously, with the medical clearance, that was an improper decision by the city to refuse to return her to work after she'd been cleared by a medical professional. The worst part about it was that they didn't actually fire her for a while. They just left her in limbo. She was on unpaid leave for months, and then she basically just asked, "Hey, what's the deal? Am I employed? Am I no longer employed?"

And unfortunately, only then did she get a termination letter.

So, we're sitting there at trial, and I knew that we tried a good case. Like I said, I tried several cases before as second chair, and you can kind of get a feel midway through if the jury's kind of leaning your way. I thought we had a really

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good shot at this one, but you never know while the jury is deliberating.

And so then – Judge Torrance lets us know, and like I said, I realized – there's another zero there. It ended up being over a million dollar verdict. My parents had actually come to see closing arguments and to wait for the verdict. And so they're kind of looking at me wondering what we had just talked to Judge Torrance about. And I kind of leaned back as we're waiting for the jury, and my dad made eye contact with me and mouthed "good?" and I just nodded to him.

And then, of course, just getting to tell Jeanne what that number was, and seeing her break down with joy and finally feel vindicated and heard – knowing it had been almost five years since she'd been fired by the time the jury verdict came in, and seeing the gratitude.

Somebody heard her story, believed in what she went through, and believed that it was wrong. It was a really cool experience to share that with Jeanne. It was a very special first first chair trial.

**The first decade of your career you spent working with your dad. What has it been like to have a career that, incidentally, has you carrying on your dad's legacy like you are?**

You know, I still, at least once every couple months, I'll go to a deposition and a court reporter or somebody will say, "Hey, how's your dad doing?" He's left such a good name in the community, and I'm so fortunate for that, because literally, in this business, your name is all you have. Because if your name is in the gutter, you're not going to get clients. People aren't going to trust you. And so for him to have laid out that legacy for me to where people are still asking, "How's he doing?" is something I'm thankful for every day. I get people who say, "Yeah, I had a deposition with him 30 years ago, and I just remember how kind he was to everybody."

When I was still in law school, we took on a case in Joplin. I went down there with him. We were inspecting a plant – a fume leak of some sort, and this was the first time I'd seen him interact with opposing counsel. It was my job to videotape the plant, and I saw him talking to the other lawyer and joking, and just being kind. And it made me

realize that, you know, we're all just doing our jobs here. We're representing people who need to be represented. The "other side" isn't necessarily bad. We're all just doing our job, and we can all get along and practice and get justice in a way that is cordial and friendly.

The only problem was that it got me in trouble because I joined in the joking and banter with the defense lawyer when I was supposed to be videotaping the plant. My dad kind of nudged me and says, "Hey, you still gotta' videotape and get everything that we need here. We can all be friends, but we still have a job to do."

That's actually one of my favorite memories from working with Dad on cases.

**Many of your cases deal with employment discrimination—what draws you to them?**

It's paradoxical. I understand that my situation in life has presented me with some very important opportunities that I know that not everybody else has gotten.


I feel like in our society, we have a tendency to pull people down, and so, you know, I know that I've had a lot of opportunities in life because of my background and the privileges that I recognize that I've been given. I feel like I have a special opportunity to use my position in the legal world to help lift up people that don't always get the same representation and opportunities as others. It's really all about working together to create a level playing field for everyone.

Our country is based on the idea that no person is more than another, and so I like to see myself as performing work that furthers that important idea. If I have the opportunity to make one person's life better, to give them the dignity that they deserve, I think that I have to take that opportunity, even if it's not going to solve all the world's problems, it's going to make that one person's life story different.

**With your perspective looking at your dad as an adult, what do you hope your kids hear about you some day?**

So I hope that the one thing that they hear about me is exactly what I hear about my dad, that he is a good person, and a heck of a lawyer.

*Stephanie Klein is the founder and principal of Chief of Story, a Prairie Village/Kansas City-based fractional CMO service launched in 2023.*



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