



COURTESY JUSTIN STUDSTILL

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Valdosta State University, political science
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HIS DRAWL IS AS THICK as leftover shrimp and grits. He wears cowboy boots into South Georgia courtrooms. It's an edge, to be sure, but you need more than a Matlock-like performance to win a case in Valdosta.

Justin Studstill has more. He learned it down on the farm.

"His experiences taught him important lessons and values helpful in the trial practice," says John Christopher Clark, a former colleague at O'Neal, Brown & Clark in Macon. "Hard work, anticipating problems before they happen, risk control and perseverance."

Studstill grew up in Nashville, Ga., about 12 miles east of I-75 between Tifton and Valdosta. His grandfather ran a 400-acre farm—which has been in his family for 100 years—in nearby Lakeland. When Studstill was about 10, his father sent him to the farm to help out in the summer, which he continued through high school and college.

The main crop then was tobacco. "Very labor-intensive," Studstill says.

"I was around people who were working paycheck to paycheck," Studstill recalls. "It helped me a lot to get to know the working people in rural Georgia. They are the people you are going to find in the jury box."

Today, peanuts and corn are the cash crops, and Studstill still puts in time on weekends. Much more of his time is spent at Studstill Firm, where his father and wife are his law partners.

"Some of his best thinking is done on a tractor on the weekends," says his wife, Haynes Studstill. "It's therapy, I guess." She agrees that the farm helped shape his life.

"He was charged with a lot of responsibility at a young age," she says. "He's the hardest working guy I know. That's why he's a successful lawyer. He'll outwork the other side every time."

In a recent case against a railroad company, she says, opposing counsel tried to bury him in paperwork during discovery. "He read everything and came out with a letter asking for more. They thought they were covering him up."

The couple, who met in law school, has Atlanta legal chops, too. After graduation, Justin went to work with former Georgia Attorney General Michael Bowers at Balch & Bingham; Haynes went to King & Spalding. They moved to Macon, where trial attorney Manley Brown, senior partner at O'Neal & Brown, was a mentor. "It helps being trained by someone of that caliber," Justin Studstill says. "I owe them a lot."

Haynes Studstill and her father-in-law started Studstill Firm in 2009. Justin Studstill joined them this year. They now have offices in Valdosta, Nashville and Macon.

That's where the cowboy boots come in.

"It's always comforting to walk into a courtroom wearing cowboy boots and see two or three jurors wearing cowboy boots," Studstill says with a laugh. "It's a subconscious thing. It may not help me in Fulton County, but it sure helps in Berrien County." 

—Paul Shea