

BUSINESS LAW TODAY

Member Spotlight:

An Interview with Sen. Aaron D. Ford



Aaron D. Ford is juggling more roles and responsibilities than most people: A Nevada state senator; a partner at Snell & Wilner, concentrating on complex commercial litigation, alternative dispute resolution, and products liability; and married, with four children. “I’m doing what I like to do,” he said. “In terms of my professional life, the common thread is a desire to serve the public.” Ford graduated from Moritz College of Law at Ohio State University from their joint-degree program, receiving a JD and PhD in Educational Administration. In 2012, he won a seat in the Nevada State Senate, and in 2013, he was recognized by many organizations and publications, including the Nevada Conservation League as “Senator of the Year.”

As “Senator of the Year,”

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You worked as a public school math teacher. What makes a great teacher?

The answer is probably comparable to many other professions. Preparation is the best quality of a good teacher, in addition to the appropriate background education, aligned with the patience necessary to teach different learning styles at a pace where everything can be accomplished.

It seems you really enjoyed teaching. What made you want to become a lawyer?

I was working on a PhD in Educational Administration because I ultimately wanted to open up a system of international charter schools. The PhD program at Ohio State University allowed for a joint JD–PhD. I thought the JD would assist me in better understanding the rules and regulations associated with opening up charter schools on a national basis. So, I signed up for the joint program, got into law school for the second year of my PhD program, and ultimately, fell in love with the law. I also got the opportunity to learn about a new area of law called Educational Law.

My first law firm job out of law school was working at a law firm that represented school districts in the area of school law. Since then, I expanded my practice to include litigation in general.

What’s happened to the dream of charter schools? Is it in the background somewhere?

I still have the blueprint. It was going to be called the Carter G. Woodson International School System. It was going to have a component of charter schools in inner cities throughout the nation, with a requirement to study abroad at sister schools that I was going to open and operate all throughout Latin America. That blueprint isn’t some-

thing that I’ve dusted it off in a while, frankly, but it’s certainly something that continues to pique my interest.

After graduating from law school, you then went on and worked as a law clerk for the U.S. District Court, Eastern District of Michigan and the Ninth Circuit. How have these two experiences helped you as a lawyer and as a senator?

There’s no question that working for both Judge Denise Page Hood on the U.S. District Court, Eastern District of Michigan and Judge Johnnie Rawlinson on the Ninth Circuit more than adequately prepared me for the practice of law.

The way of thinking about the law and understanding and analyzing it from a perspective of interactions has helped me tremendously. It’s something that supports me and my decision-making process to this day. On the one hand, I tend to be an analytical individual, but on the other hand, I make certain that I consider the policies that we are contemplating and acting upon here in the legislature to see how it affects people. That’s something I learned very quickly working on the district court and the Ninth Circuit; our laws are more than just these lofty goals and ideas. They’re actually things that affect people. And so, I keep that in mind as I participate in the legislature.

What made you want to get involved in politics?

It's an interesting story. I first became interested in politics around the 2000 election, with Bush vs. Gore, and I saw the debacle, when the U.S. Supreme Court halted the recount. It piqued an interest of mine that made me want to get involved and try to move things forward in our country. The timing was obviously not right. I was still working on my PhD. I was also in law school. I had a brand-new baby. Ultimately, it took about 10 years before things had settled down in my life, such that I was in the position to take advantage of that desire. But the primary impetus of that point was looking at the educational system here in Nevada.

I had four children in our public schools, ranging from kindergarten to a senior in high school. Each of those schools had their respective challenges, and I wanted to get involved in politics to help address some of those.

You first ran for state senator in 2010 and lost. Then you ran successfully in 2012. What was the key to your success the second time around?

Honestly, I don't know if I changed anything between the two runs. We ultimately built a new house in Nevada, and it happened to be during the redistricting time period. I fell into a different district this time, which happened to be a bit more demographically friendly toward my particular political persuasion.

But I continued with the same approach and motive, which was to knock on doors and then make phone calls, and to attend events, and to express myself by my pure and honest perspectives in a way that I think appealed to voters, and I was successful.

You have a lot of experience in education, not only in receiving your PhD, but you served on the Senate Committee on Education as the vice chair. If you could change one thing about that public education system in Nevada, what would it be?

I've said before and I'll say it again. We may live in the Silver State, but I don't believe

there is a silver bullet when it comes to a lot of our needs like educational reform. I couldn't say that there would be a single thing I'd change. I can only offer you what I considered to be four of the most important things: school funding; teacher preparation and accountability; parental responsibility and involvement (that is, making sure that parents are involved in the academic endeavors of their kids); and then fourth, and probably the most important, is student accountability and student involvement. I've talked to many different school districts, and the combination of those four things have helped to shape the success of the students.

Why is student accountability and involvement the most important?

Students have to take an interest in their own educational and academic endeavors, because all of the money, parental responsibility and parental involvement, and teacher preparation in the world won't budge a student who doesn't have the desire or interest to be educated.

In terms of your work as a senator, what are you most proud of?

The thing that gives me the most pride in my position is that I enjoy speaking truth to power, from a position of power, recognizing that there are voices everyday that go unheard, voices that were prevalent around me as a child and that continue to be around me on a daily basis that often times are ignored in the political process.

I try to be conscious of the way I act and interact with people and the way I look at policies. As I've indicated, I want to know how it affects the actual person. And so, speaking power to power, speaking truth to power from a position of power, I think is what I'm most proud of being able to do here.

What would you change about politics?

It's going to sound very cliché, but the truth is politics is very partisan these days. In Nevada, we've experienced the recent turnover in terms of the political power and the political structure here.

At one point, the Democrats held or controlled both the Senate and the Assembly,

and had four of the five constitutional offices. But after the 2014 election, these offices are now held by Republicans, and they control both chambers in our state legislature.

What I've seen thus far in the first two weeks and a day with the session, unfortunately, is a partisanship that I don't think best benefits our state. I chaired the Natural Resources Committee last session. I was in the majority. With the exception of about two bills coming out of that committee, every single bill was unanimous. The three Democrats and the two Republicans found an opportunity to compromise and to push bills out of committee on a unanimous front, and I think that's indicative of what's necessary to move our state forward.

And you could say this is happening at the national level as well?

There's no question. It's also happening in many states. State legislatures are seeing the hyper-partisan approach to legislation and policy that causes problems for us going forward.

You're also a partner at Snell & Wilmer. Your law practice concentrates on complex commercial litigation, alternative dispute resolution, and product liability. What do you enjoy about practicing law?

Again, it's an opportunity to look at a problem and attempt to reconcile the situation for our clients. There's no question in my mind that these issues are just as important as life-and-death issues for some people, whether you're dealing with a criminal case in that context or a financial situation. Oftentimes, these issues can make or break companies and clients.

I enjoy being able to act and interact with clients and opposing counsel and their clients in an effort to try to resolve the dispute.

What don't you enjoy about the practice of law?

It's interesting, because when I used the word "partisanship" in the political context, the analogous word would be the adversarial nature of law, although it's part and parcel of our process. But you should

be able to be adversarial, while at the same time being respectful. Sometimes in the practice of law, people take the adversarial approach to the extreme and it ends up being counterproductive to try to get situations and issues resolved.

What advice would you give to young lawyers who are just starting out?

One of the things that I did when I was a young lawyer was to find a mentor. By the way, this advice isn't just for lawyers; it's for anyone who wants to improve themselves.

I will never forget reaching out to the former mayor of Dallas, Ron Kirk. I was moving back to Dallas and I was looking for a mentor, and I found his e-mail and I e-mailed him. I said, "I'm going to make you my mentor and really, you have no choice. You don't get to choose who looks up to you and who doesn't." And he was gracious enough to accept the role.

Beyond finding a mentor, look for opportunities to develop yourself professionally, find out ways that individuals made it through the system, notwithstanding whatever challenges and circumstances they face. See if there is some inspiration internally that can help you get to the next level as well.

You're a senator, a law partner, you have four children, you're married. How do you manage it all?

Well, through the grace of God and through a fantastic family. My wife and I

have a fantastic marriage and a fantastic partnership. She and I share a common belief that we're here to make the other as successful as possible in whatever those endeavors are. Whether it's my wife opening up her own law practice as she did a few years back, or it's me running for office, we support one another 100 percent. My children have an appreciation of me, and an understanding nature about the things we're doing.

When I'm in Vegas at home, our family prays before the children go to school. My youngest son who is nine always ends the praying by saying, "Lord, please help my daddy make some good laws for the people of the City of Nevada." And I think those types of prayers speak volumes to the type of the family that we have. Without them, I couldn't be doing what I'm doing.

You're also very involved in the community. You're a board member of I Have a Dream Foundation and Junior Achievement of Southern Nevada, and many others. Why is it important to you to be involved in the community?

It speaks again to this notion of finding mentors, but also being a mentor and giving back to the community. Being a teacher, a lawyer, and a politician have a common thread between them, and that is there is a desire to serve the public.

Getting involved in community activities is just an extension and a manifestation of my desire to give back to the community and be involved in the community.

You've also been very involved with the ABA in the Business Law Section and Litigation Section. What has been the value of your involvement in these organizations?

Oh my, the networking there has been spectacular. I was a Business Law Ambassador to the Business Law Section a few years back, and so was my wife. That was my real entry into the ABA world. I have established friendships with folks that extend beyond just work referrals. Anytime they're in the area or I'm in theirs, we connect and have a great time. I recommend the ABA membership to any and all attorney of all ages.

You've received many awards both as being a senator and a lawyer. Is there one that you're particularly proud of?

If I had to pick, it would be obtaining Pro Bono Lawyer of the Year in 2006, when I was in Dallas, working at Weil, Gotshal & Manges. I got to work for six months at the Dallas Volunteer Attorney Program. Working for an extended period of time doing pro bono was the most rewarding thing for me.

Thank you so much!