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20 UNDER 40

The state of the legal business is dismal. Revenues are down. Clients are complaining about the bills. Firms want their lawyers to be better rainmakers. There's no time for pro bono work — not to mention a personal life!

Set aside those concerns for a moment, and consider this year's list of the Daily Journal's 20 top lawyers under 40. Suddenly, the future doesn't look so bleak.

So take a few minutes away from the billables and read on about these 20 fascinating lawyers. You'll find that times may be tough but the legal industry is still pretty spectacular. In what other profession can you do such intellectually stimulating work while changing a little (or even a big) part of the world — and, perhaps, make a little money while doing it.

— The Editors



SEAN MORRIS | 37

Business litigation

Arnold & Porter

LOS ANGELES

Nine years ago, as a fourth-year associate, Sean Morris found himself walking into the lavish London townhouse of Prince Jefri Bolkiah, brother to the Sultan of Brunei, to take the royal's deposition.

"It was one of those things where I was let in by a guard into the house. It was all very nice, I didn't feel threatened or anything," Morris said. "But it was somewhat intimidating as a mid-level associate to be taking the deposition of the lead defendant in the case."

Morris remembers the case — a business deal gone awry between Arnold & Porter's client Bijan Fragrances and the prince — not simply as his brush with Southeast Asian royalty, but as a turning point in his career. The responsibility and trust he received from the firm in handling the lead deposition helped him grow as a lawyer, Morris said.

Now, as a partner at Arnold & Porter with several lead depositions under his belt, Morris is making his mark in some of California's most

cutting edge legal issues involving class action litigation.

In 2007, Morris was the lead defense counsel in a case that brought to center the issue of whether public entity plaintiffs can hire outside law firms to represent them in public-nuisance claims.

Morris represented the lead paint industry and convinced a Santa Clara County court that the cities and counties in California who brought the claims against his client while hiring firms on a contingency-fee basis were violating a requirement of neutrality in attorneys working for the government. Such attorneys must have no financial stake in the outcome of the case, as established by a 1985 California Supreme Court decision, he argued.

After a successful appeal by the plaintiffs, who included Santa Clara County and San Francisco, in April 2008, the case is under review by the California Supreme Court. The outcome can have a bearing on public entity and lead paint litigation across the country.

"It's not every case where you've got such fundamental issues at this stage in litigation," Morris said. "Doing things that will have a widespread impact is something that is the challenging and interesting and the fun part of being a lawyer."

Morris, who graduated from UCLA School of Law in 1996, grew up in Oxnard and once considered becoming a teacher. Both of his parents were teachers. His mother taught English at Oxnard High School, which Morris attended, and his father taught history and economics at nearby Thousand Oaks High School. But while participating in his high school's mock trial team, Morris met a lawyer, who had volunteered as the coach, who piqued his interest in law.

But Morris hasn't turned his back on his belief in the importance of teaching. With the encouragement of his firm, Morris formed a non-profit called Reading to Kids, which organizes volunteers to read to children from the Los Angeles Unified School District's schools on weekends.

"We give each kid a prize book, like a 'Goosebumps' book or something fun to read," Morris said. "It's something where I was able to crossover my interest and ability in the law to something important to me."

Morris also is representing BP in 25 class actions involving temperature-adjusted motor fuel sales, popularly known as "hot gas." The actions have been combined into a single multidistrict litigation proceeding in Kansas federal court. He also represents Jamster in a class action in the Southern District of California, examining the enforceability of contracts formed through cellular phone text messaging.

— REBECCA U. CHO