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Taking the next step into Colorado's legal community



BRETT MELLOR

BY DOUG CHARTIER
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When people talk about their first job, it tends to be something menial and relatively unchallenging. But Brett Mellor can say his first full-time job was as an associate attorney at an international law firm.

Mellor is a new associate patent attorney who joined Kilpatrick Townsend & Stockton's Denver office this fall after completing its summer associate program. His accomplishments belie his 29 years of age. His berth in the legal field comes after he earned not only his law degree from the University of Virginia School of Law but also his doctorate degree in electrical engineering at Brigham Young University. In fact, dating back to when his mother entered him into preschool as a 2-year-old, Mellor has been in school nearly nonstop.

"I've been preparing for this job for 27 years," Mellor said.

Mellor has made intellectual rigor a lifestyle from an early age, and in high school he made a point of always taking the hardest courses available to him. When deciding on a major at BYU, he asked his academic counselor which program was the most difficult. Electrical engineering, he was told — and thenceforth he pursued and electrical

engineering degree.

Never mind that he didn't know at the time what electrical engineering was or how circuits worked. But five years later, Mellor left that counselor's office with a doctorate.

"I never really planned to do a Ph.D.," Mellor said. "I just kept taking classes until they ran out of degrees to give me."

Halfway through his undergraduate program, Mellor began to genuinely enjoy engineering on its own terms and not just for the challenge it presented. It became even more fun during his doctoral research when he "stumbled upon some huge holes" in the field's body of knowledge.

His research centered on electrical biosensors — specifically devices that can detect the presence of certain proteins in human blood. Using the sensors this way constitutes an innovative technique that could help scientists calculate a person's susceptibility to hundreds of different diseases based on a blood sample, and Mellor designed circuits that could perform that function. It's a difficult technique to use reliably at this early stage, Mellor said, but once scientists can get it to work, it could revolutionize the health care industry.

The average doctorate degree requires five to seven years of study, but

Mellor got it done in three. His "secret weapon," he said, was a research methodology he had used for his sixth grade science fair project. Back then, he investigated how wooden fences could optimally be designed to block wind, and the project took top honors in the state of Utah that year. He applied the same methodology to optimize biosensors to detect certain materials, and the findings spawned Mellor's five first-author journal articles.

"I know 99 percent of students and parents hate the science fair, they think it's a complete waste of time," Mellor said. "But I am one of the biggest science fair fans you'll ever meet. It's one of the main reasons they (BYU) gave me a Ph.D."

But Mellor sought another challenge, which of course would entail another layer of education. In the midst of his research, he took the LSAT, and he attended his first law school courses within a month after defending his dissertation.

Patent law attracted Mellor because it afforded him a new experience of learning while applying his engineering knowledge, and he liked "the idea of synergy between two disciplines that seem totally unrelated," he said.

Engineers aren't exactly known for abstract thinking, although Mellor

would argue his experience in electrical engineering, in particular, helped prepare him for legal studies in that sense. Dealing with the invisibility of electricity required regular abstract thought and problem solving that proved helpful to Mellor when grasping legal concepts.

Mellor said his life's most challenging experience came not from law school or even his engineering work, but during a two-year hiatus from his education. His mission trip to Brazil from 2005 to 2007 wrenched him from his comfort zone as he spent 11 hours a day walking the streets approaching strangers to talk to them about his church's message.

The experience helped him develop social skills, he said, in addition to a fluency in Portuguese, which he attained in about eight months of living in Brazil.

"It's crazy how fast it happens from basically nothing to being fluent, and you don't even realize it's happening," Mellor said. Seeing how quickly he picked up a foreign language through immersion, his interest in acquiring languages only persisted from there, with his third being Spanish. Today he listens to Spanish-language podcasts almost daily as a means of passively absorbing the language.

"That's how you learn it — you just listen to 'gibberish,' and at some point it just clicks," Mellor said, adding that he can now understand at least 95 percent of spoken Spanish.

When he's not working, Mellor spends time with his wife of eight years and their two boys, ages 4 and 1. He also enjoys creating electronic music, with Daft Punk and Deadmau5 among his favorite artists in the genre. He has two albums of his own material that he plans to release once he's done tinkering with them.

Practicing patent law at Kilpatrick Townsend, Mellor said he is excited to be surrounded by innovation — "to work with high-tech companies and be exposed to their smartest people, their biggest ideas." He might have finally found a place where he can feel satisfied not pursuing additional degrees but still rapidly expand his knowledge.

"I love learning," Mellor said. "I feel edified every time I learn something new." •

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