Even before Preston L. Pugh actually started his legal career, people often asked when he would join the firm that his father, Stephen Pugh, co-founded. Today it is known as Pugh, Jones & Johnson PC.

For some people who looked in from the outside, the answer was for Pugh to hang from his dad’s coattails and work under him fresh out of law school. Instead, he wanted to build out his own career first, on his own.

After 12 years of developing his trial and investigations skills at places such as the U.S. attorney’s office, Sonnenschein Nath & Rosenthal LLP, and the General Electric Company, Pugh carved out his niche and came onboard at Pugh Jones & Johnson.

Today, Pugh has already proven his ability to successfully handle complex legal cases and to gain the confidence of numerous clients. It’s now about building toward the future of the firm.

Family of Entrepreneurs

Pugh was born in Chicago in 1972 and raised in Olympia Fields until he moved back to the city in high school. His mother Joyce is a retired librarian and career educator who took time away from her career to raise him.

Pugh wanted to have his own identity, and his father agreed. Simply hopping into law out of expectation was unwise. So Pugh went to Cornell University to study business with the idea that he might keep his family’s entrepreneurial torch burning. His maternal grandparents came from Georgia to start Skeet’s, one of the largest black-owned grocery stores on the South Side.

“People didn’t really understand why my dad wanted to start his own thing after rising through the ranks to become one of the first black partners of any major law firm in Chicago,” Pugh says. “He had a very close relationship with my grandfather, and he understood the power of being an entrepreneur, and I’ve always had that bent myself.”

Pugh studied in the Industrial Labor Relations program at Cornell, but he also took a labor law course that turned out to be fatal in 1991, the same year Stephen co-founded his firm.

“I had a professor known for being one of the toughest throughout campus,” he says. “When I started getting answers right in that class and giving explanations that he thought made sense, I figured I found something and that it might be a good time to think about becoming a lawyer.”

Living on the East Coast

Early on while at New York University School of Law, Pugh knew he wanted to be a trial lawyer, but he also wanted to use his human resources strategy background. An externship in which he was a union organizer in Georgia, Alabama and Mississippi helped strengthen his resolve to learn more about the labor movement.

After finishing law school, Pugh sought work on the East Coast, but not in New York. “I developed a great base of friends and law school and undergrad contacts in New York, which I maintain to this day, but I also wanted to see a little more of the country,” he says.

He landed his first job in Washington, D.C., as an appellate lawyer at the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB). Working in the board’s appellate court branch gave him an opportunity to practice at the highest levels of labor law. It also proved to be extremely beneficial to his developing skills in oral argument and brief writing.

“My writing was passing at NYU, but it needed to be stronger,” he says. “The NLRB taught me how to write on an appellate level.”

Pugh was making formal arguments in the federal courts of appeal within the first four months, an unusually high degree of early responsibility that would come to govern his approach to his career.
“It’s uncommon for any lawyer to have that level of exposure before reaching a partner level,” he says. “But I have firmly come to believe that if you’re ready, there’s no reason to wait.”

Wife Helped Put Him on Fast Track

Pugh put in the hours to get through the beginning of his career, but he is “100 percent certain” he would not have made it far without his wife Rebecca at his side.

“She carried me from the end of law school to the beginning of work,” he says. “We were in Washington, and I actually started off with very little money. My wife was a teacher and didn’t have a ton herself, but she gave me everything she had and all the support I could want. Since then, she’s been a better partner than I could have ever hoped for.”

Their life changes motivated Pugh to leave the NLRB. In 1999, they were engaged to get married, and she wanted to move to Chicago to get to know his side of the family. Pugh also was looking to transition into a U.S. attorney’s office.

Pugh’s father and the firm’s co-founder, Walter Jones, met in 1973 at the Dirksen Federal Building. Jones was in the U.S. attorney’s office and Pugh’s father later joined as a member of the Department of Justice Strike Force.

“To say I had a fond impression of the office is probably an understatement,” Pugh says. “Everything came together when Rebecca got a job in education policy in Chicago and Pugh started in the Civil Division of the U.S. attorney’s office. He used his familiarity with the labor side to do Title VII and other employment cases, including qui tam investigations that, he says, were in vogue at the turn of the century.

“Today’s settlements of $2 billion to $3 billion that aren’t so shocking now didn’t really exist 10 to 12 years ago,” he says. “When the government was focusing on health care fraud, research grants and average wholesale pricing, these issues started making their way to U.S. attorney’s offices all over the country.”

Apart from his current role, Pugh’s favorite job was working for the U.S. attorney’s office. He tried jury cases and gave closing arguments within his first year.

“I came into the office after just two years of practicing,” he says. “At that time, most people were going in after several years in law firms and clerkships. It was a big honor to me just to practice with these very smart, talented, great trial lawyers.”

Pugh’s Rapid Career Progression

One thing that characterized Pugh’s early career was his consistent movement from one position to another. Part of it was necessity; part of it was seeking the responsibility he had in his early career.

When Pugh left the U.S. attorney’s office in 2002, he did so strictly because he and Rebecca were expecting their first child. He needed a private firm salary to offset childcare costs and his heavy law school loans.

Jenner & Block recruited him as an associate, which was a tough transition for someone who had already argued a dozen federal appeals and tried eight federal cases.

“Not having the level of responsibility I was used to was difficult, so I started looking for ways to get that responsibility,” he says.

At Jenner, he took on a pro bono prisoner ineffective assistance of counsel appeal, resulting in what he calls “one of the best briefs I’ve ever written.” The Seventh Circuit wrote a per curiam opinion in the case agreeing with Pugh and his U.S. attorneys and subsequently remanded the case back to the district court.

Around the same time, he became an adjunct appellate law professor at Loyola University Chicago School of Law and was one of the youngest attorneys ever selected to the Law Bulletin Publishing Company’s 40 Attorneys Under Forty to Watch.

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After Jenner & Block, Pugh joined labor and employment law firm Littler Mendelson, where after just a year of being an associate, he became a partner. At Littler, Pugh was able to take cases and “run with them.”

“I was able to do more of the work I was looking for and brought in significant business as an associate,” he says. “It was a good ramp to the rest of my career.”

In 2006, Pugh took a brief detour from private practice to become GE Healthcare’s senior counsel for investigations and litigation. He personally led investigations in China, Korea, Brazil and a number of places in Europe, in addition to managing all of GE Healthcare’s commercial litigation.

“The folks I reported to at GE promised I would see the world, and they delivered,” Pugh says.

Stephen Pugh says he cautioned his son against changing firms so frequently at the time, though he understands in hindsight why Preston made the decisions.

“Big firms are difficult for everyone, but especially African-American males,” Stephen says. “I’ve seen very few black male partners at major law firms in the last 40 years I’ve been in law.

“However, I understand why someone like Preston, who is ambitious, who has talent, and who was looking to make his mark, could size that up more quickly than I could when I was with a major law firm.”

Continuing to Build a Legacy

Pugh started at Pugh Jones & Johnson in June 2009. Both Pugh and his father readily acknowledge that he never would have worked there if it hadn’t made sense in his career.

“We both aspired to have the opportunity to work together, but knew we wouldn’t at the very beginning of my career,” Preston says. “It was spoken in the very beginning that it was more important to get training outside the firm instead of relying on it to develop my practice 100 percent.”

Today, Pugh is on a short list of former assistants who are sought to defend large clients facing government investigations and whistleblower cases, but who also intimately understand labor and employment law.

He also serves as a compliance monitor both in Chicago and New York, the work that was featured in a prominent 2013 article in the New York Post.

Pugh counts among his mentors Paul Bateman, former member of Littler Mendelson’s executive committee; Judge Raymond Lohier of the 2nd U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals; and Sam Scott, former CEO of Corn Products and current board member of several Fortune 500 companies, who referred Pugh to work with private bank BNY Mellon.

“I find him to be a very solid citizen and great in the legal profession,” Scott says. “I was impressed by him, his resume and the work he has done.”

After five years with the firm, Pugh says he’s having a “phenomenal experience.”

“I’ve been able to gain an understanding of what my dad, Walter Jones and Dennis Johnson have built—the effort and difficulty after 23 years,” Pugh says.

“Most small law firms don’t last past five years. Most minority firms don’t last past the first five years, and we’re one of the oldest minority firms in the country. Now, I have the desire to see us succeed for the next 23 years.”

Ronald Goldstock, commissioner for the Waterfront Commission of New York Harbor and one of leaders of New York’s integrity monitoring bar, became something of a mentor for Pugh after working with him.

“Preston realizes that he’s not just working for himself, he’s working for the legacy of his father’s firm,” Goldstock says. “You can tell that it’s very important to him in the work that he does.”

Stephen is glad Preston made his own way before coming onboard.

“As a father in a name firm like this, bringing in your son can be detrimental if things don’t work out,” he says. “Thank God that has not happened. He was able with his personality and his work ethic and intelligence to make it. I’m very proud of that.”

Paying It Forward

Pugh has long enjoyed making connections with young attorneys inside and outside of law firms, as well as with law students. He has mentored those involved with the law since shortly after getting out of law school himself.

The positive feedback he received from judges earlier in his career built his confidence and made him a better lawyer, Pugh notes.

“I’ve always had the benefit of having great mentors, though I’m different than a lot of people because my greatest mentor has always been and will always be the person who was also the best man in my wedding—my dad,” he says.

Pugh motivates his mentees to exceed expectations and take on responsibility beyond their years, much like he did when he brought in clients as an associate at Littler Mendelson.

“I always tell them that while they may think they are limited in what they can do because they’re only one, two or three years out of law school, that’s not the case,” he says.

“When I was in my first two years of practice, I took on oral arguments against excellent lawyers who’d been practicing 25 or 30 years. When I became an adjunct professor after three years of practice, my peers were 10 and 20 years my senior. Just because you’re young, it does not set a ceiling on what you can do.”