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Spector Gadon Adds Prominent Atlanta Litigator With Philadelphia Roots

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By Zack Needles | January 04, 2019



John Da Grosa Smith

Spector Gadon & Rosen has added well-known Atlanta litigator and Philadelphia native John Da Grosa Smith as a member.

The move, which became effective Dec. 3 and was announced Jan. 3, gives Spector Gadon a presence in Atlanta and provides a larger practice platform for Smith, who ran

an Atlanta-based complex litigation boutique under the name of [SMITH LLC](https://www.smithlit.com/) (<https://www.smithlit.com/>) for more than a decade.

But even in the era of law firm merger madness (<https://www.law.com/thelegalintelligencer/2019/01/02/law-firm-mergers-were-red-hot-in-2018-with-no-slowdown-in-sight-402-33335/>), Smith would seem an unlikely candidate to combine his practice with that of a larger firm.

The litigator has modeled himself as something of an outsider, whose lack of affiliation with a traditional law firm or specific bar group has allowed him to remain, in his words, “uncompromised.” It’s given him the ability to carry out an aggressive, sometimes confrontational style of client advocacy without having to worry about ruffling his colleagues’ feathers.

As he put it in an interview last year: “What I found was that when I had those opportunities to do work against other big law firms, the lawyers at those firms then started referring me work. They didn’t refer me work because I played golf, or went to their school, or sat down at some lunch. A lot of those lawyers who referred me work didn’t like me so much and that was fine by me. They respected my work and that was integrity.”

But despite that lone wolf mentality, Smith, who grew up in Philadelphia and began his career as a prosecutor in the Philadelphia District Attorney’s Office upon graduating from Temple University’s James E. Beasley School of Law, said Friday that he has long wanted to re-establish himself in the city and that Spector Gadon offered a unique opportunity to do that.

Smith said he’s had discussions with other firms about the possibility of joining forces but it always seemed like doing so would require him to soften his hard-nosed style.

But that style is exactly what sold Spector Gadon chairman Paul Rosen on him.

Rosen said his close friend and Philadelphia attorney Henry Donner first recommended Smith.

“He said, ‘I’ve got to tell you about a guy that I think is you 20 years ago. ... I think he’d be a perfect fit for you,’” Rosen recalled.

After meeting Smith, Rosen said he came away impressed with the Atlanta attorney’s ability to build a successful practice from the ground up by taking on an eclectic array of cases “with no fear.”

One of Smith’s most high-profile victories came in 2013, when he successfully represented Paul Jannuzzo, former general counsel and chief operating officer of international gun manufacturer Glock Inc., in his appeal from a racketeering conviction. After the Georgia Court of Appeals tossed out the conviction, (<https://www.law.com/almlID/1373367271333/>) the Cobb County district attorney declined to challenge the decision, calling the case “beyond the point of repair.”

Smith said he was impressed after meeting Rosen too, describing Spector Gadon and its chairman as “creative, innovative and unconventional.”

“I was never concerned that [if I joined] I would do something in a case and Paul would say, ‘What? Why would you do that? That’s crazy,’” Smith said. “He probably would have an even better idea. We’re like-minded. If it was another type of firm you would be hitting your head against a brick wall trying to do something unconventional.”

The meeting was also fortuitous, as Rosen had been thinking more and more about succession planning.

Though Rosen said he’s nowhere near retirement, he has identified the younger attorneys he believes will carry the firm into the future, naming, in addition to Smith, executive committee member George Vinci Jr.

Smith, like Vinci, has “the youth, the name and the practice to build the firm further,” Rosen said.

Smith said his practice often requires him to travel all over the country but that he anticipates spending more time in Philadelphia than in Atlanta, at least in the early going.

Meanwhile, Rosen made clear that the firm is, at least for the moment, not looking to expand in Atlanta beyond what Smith's practice may eventually necessitate.

"It builds because John's building it, but we're not looking to have an Atlanta office" in the traditional sense, Rosen said.

Smith has operated his boutique out of an industrial loft in Atlanta's West Midtown section and his business model involves a high degree of rate flexibility and the ability to scale up or down with the help of a small, tight-knit group of attorneys as needed. The plan, according to both Rosen and Smith, is to let Smith operate in much the same way he has for the past 10 years.

In that way, Smith said, his move is not like a traditional lateral, in which the hire conforms to the firm's structure.

"Spector Gadon embraced the idea of the [SMITH] brand, that whole approach," Smith said.

According to Smith, one of the main services he has long offered that meshes well with Spector Gadon's practice is what he describes as "litigation consulting."

"I'm able to come in and say, 'Let me give you a strategy idea, let me augment your team,'" Smith said. "I can come in and do that, and as a high-stakes litigator it makes me uniquely qualified to come into major cases."

Rosen said a large portion of his own practice entails being called in as a problem-solver in active litigation where other firms are already involved.

But that model only works, both Rosen and Smith said, if the larger firms can feel secure that the lawyers they partner with to solve a specific problem are not out to steal their institutional clients.

“That gives people the comfort to go find that gunslinger,” Smith said.

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