

DAILY REPORT

Our staff's annual picks of lawyers under 40 we think you should know more about

MAWULI M. DAVIS sees his criminal defense practice as an extension of his community activism.

He says his obligation to clients goes beyond appearing in court with them, “especially with the unbelievable numbers of young African Americans now incarcerated or in the court system.”

Many of Davis’s clients are young African-American men between 15 and 25 and a number are first-time offenders. He says he wants to put them on a better path.

“I sit them down and talk to them,” Davis says. “I’m trying to redirect—to be a positive influence on their lives.”

Some of what he does is social service work. “In these times, I can’t be limited to ‘I’ll see you in court,’” he says.

Robert O. Bozeman, his partner in The Davis Bozeman Law Firm, says Davis gave one teenage client a job after representing him. “He brought the young man back here, like finding a lost cat.”

Davis also reduced the fee for a cash-strapped teenage client in exchange for the boy reading and writing reports on several books he assigned. He proudly reports that the boy, who was about to be expelled from high school when

ON THE RISE PROFILE:

Mawuli M. Davis

PARTNER, *The Davis Bozeman Law Firm*

- **Age:** 38
- **Law school:** Georgia State University
- **Motivation:** Fighting for the historically disenfranchised: “Those who are underrepresented in receiving sound legal counsel, yet overrepresented in the criminal justice system.”
- **Last book read:** “For Freedom’s Sake: The Life of Fannie Lou Hamer,” by Chana Kai Lee
- **Best advice received (from his mother):** “Don’t let anyone outwork you.” He was nicknamed Mr. Intensity by basketball teammates at the U.S. Naval Academy.
- **As a kid wanted to be:** a lawyer or a basketball player
- **Interesting fact:** His father is former Harlem Globetrotter Mel Davis.
- **Dream adventure:** to take his family to Ghana next year



they met, soon will graduate.

The books he recommends to clients include: “Countering the Conspiracy to Destroy Black Boys,” “Crisis in the Village: Restoring Hope in African American Communities” and “My Face Is Black Is True: Callie House and the Struggle for Ex-Slave Reparations.”

“While they’re my clients, I have their ear so I’m going to talk about how to keep this from happening again,” Davis says. “We don’t need repeat business.”

Davis recently got an armed robbery sentence reduced from 15 years to five for a 20-year-old client with no prior criminal

history.

He opened his sentencing memo to the judge with Langston Hughes’ poem “A Dream Deferred,” which he quotes: “What happens to a dream deferred? Does it dry up like a raisin in the sun ... Or does it explode?”

He told the judge his client’s dream is to one day run his own auto body shop. “What happens to a life goal with a lengthy incarceration?” Davis asks. “It’s people’s life goals that give value to our society.”

Davis, 38, is a graduate of the U.S. Naval Academy. He enrolled in Georgia State University Law School’s night program at age 29,

ON THE RISE

15 TO WATCH

They're young. They're sharp. They're making their marks on Georgia's legal scene.

while serving as a naval officer. After receiving his law degree in 2002, he spent a year at Troutman Sanders in the commercial real estate group, then left to start a criminal defense practice.

It's unusual to move from corporate law to criminal defense, says Michael V. Coleman, who hired Davis at Troutman Sanders, but he says he wasn't surprised.

"He is truly a throwback," says Coleman, now the Atlanta managing partner at Lord, Bissell & Brook. "He's one of those guys who 40 years ago would have been fighting to keep civil rights marchers out of jail or working for free to go argue before the Supreme Court on a desegregation case. That's why I think a lot of him."

M. Gino Brogdon, a former Fulton Superior Court judge, still remembers Davis' first appearance in his courtroom. "He was totally green with the fire in his eyes to defend the downtrodden," he says.

Brogdon says Davis knew everything there was to know about his clients. "He knew it all not just because he was trying to win but because he cared about what was going to happen to this person in a way that I wish I could

bottle and inject into lawyers."

Davis says he is troubled by an "epidemic of young people [involved] in armed robbery in the community of color."

Many of his clients are middle class, but have been exposed to BET, MTV and hip-hop, which glamorize "thugs and crime," he says. "That's what we're combating. There is such a small window of positive hip-hop out there right now. We're up against a big monster," he says.

Davis, who grew up on the South Side of Chicago, draws from his own experience to inspire African-American kids to make better choices.

He recruited more than 30 lawyers of color to tell third- and fourth-graders in Atlanta public schools how they became lawyers and what their jobs are like in a program called "If You Can See It, You Can Be It."

He presents "Do the Math" to teenage students, where he explains why crime does not pay. An armed robbery that yields \$1,000 only works out to a penny an hour when spread across a minimum 10-year prison sentence, he informs them, suggesting it is better math to earn \$1,000 in a month in the "safe grind" of work

at McDonald's.

Davis works with other African-American men in programs to mentor young black men. Closer to home, he coaches his two young sons' basketball teams.

In addition to his criminal defense work, Davis takes civil cases with his partner, a plaintiffs' lawyer, where someone "has been mistreated or abused for whatever reason—where the system's run amok," he says, adding, "We just like to fight."

Last year, he represented homelessness advocates arrested at City Hall for protesting the city's new law banning panhandling. He is currently representing a teenager beaten up by a city bus driver for "smarting off." Davis also is local counsel on former Atlanta mayor Bill Campbell's ongoing appeal of his 30-month prison sentence for tax evasion.

Coleman and Brogdon both predict Davis' community involvement could lead to a career in politics. Brogdon adds that he'd like to see Davis become a judge.

But Davis sees himself and Bozeman right where they are in 10 years. "We're here to build a solid community institution," he says.

—Meredith Hobbs