

This Skadden Litigator Brings a First-Gen Perspective to His Role as One of the Firm's New York Hiring Partners

Matthew Martino, the first member of his family to graduate college, regularly tells first-generation recruits about his background during interviews: “You can see them relax a bit. Then the interview becomes a lot more organic.”

By **Ross Todd**

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When **Matthew Martino** interviews associate candidates as a part of his role as one of the hiring partners for the New York office of **Skadden, Arps, Slate, Meagher & Flom**, he often shares his own background as the first in his family to graduate college to those candidates who share his “first-gen” background.

“I think when I open up about my background, you can see a lot of times it puts them at ease. You can see them relax a bit. Then the interview becomes a lot more organic,” said Martino, a litigator who spends about half his time on antitrust matters and the other half handling matters for sports clients, including the National Hockey League and National Basketball Association.

“I came into the law thinking this will be a good way to earn a good living. But it’s really been a great career for me,” he said.

The Litigation Daily recently spoke with Martino about his first-gen background, his experience at Skadden and his approach to recruiting. What follows has been edited for length and clarity.

Litigation Daily: How did you end up studying law?

Matthew Martino: I was raised by a single mother in a working-class family. So the idea in my family of making it, in succeeding in life was you were a doctor or lawyer. If you did well in school, that was the goal. Those are the two professions that were always hammered into me as a way to break out of the circumstances I grew up in and make a higher income. My mother used to call it “good money.” “You can make good money doing this.”

Where did you grow up exactly?

I grew up in South Jersey. When I was a kid it was a very rural area. They were just starting to build tract homes. There

were dirt roads and what-not. A lot of people started moving out of Camden and Philadelphia into the South Jersey area. It was a lot of working-class people. I watched my mother have a lot of financial stress on a daily basis. So it seemed like a good idea to me when she said, “You do well in school.” These are the two professions somebody in her position would see. She had doctors, right? She had a divorce lawyer. Those were things to aspire to be.

Of course, she always thought of it as, “Do this so you don’t have to work as hard as me.” Then, as you can imagine, when I was a young associate and would call her all hours of the day, she’d say, “Well, that’s not exactly what I was thinking. But at least you’re getting compensated much better than I am for working that much.”

I chose the law basically by default because I wasn’t fond of blood, and I didn’t want to deal with illnesses or anything like that. Basically, for me, the goal was to do as well in school as possible, try to get into the best college I could get into, get into the best law school I could get into, which would then hopefully lead me to be a successful lawyer, whatever that meant. And I really didn’t even know what that meant, because my only real reference points at the time were fictional lawyers I saw on TV or in movies.



Matthew Martino of Skadden, Arps, Slate, Meagher & Flom.

Courtesy photo

So I always thought of litigation in my mind because that's what lawyers I saw.

That's it. What I did wasn't incredibly well thought out or set within some grand plan. It was basically: "This is your way to step up and be successful." My mom was very focused on education for me: You continue to do well in school, and this is what's going to get you out of this environment. And so that's what I did.

What led you to Skadden then?

When I was in law school, I decided I wanted to go to one of the big New York law firms that paid well. They provided interesting work, excellent training, et cetera. Then someone in my position didn't really have a lot of resources to lean on trying to figure out what firms I should look at. So I looked at Am Law, NALP, Vault and those kinds of things. But most of the firms looked pretty much the same to me, frankly. They all even sounded kind of the same: Skadden and Sherman and Sullivan.

Other than students around me, I didn't really have anywhere to turn for advice on the firms. I basically said, "Okay, here's this set of firms in these different ranking systems. I'm going to apply to these."

I did apply to the sports firms because I was kind of interested in doing some sports work. I didn't really know what that meant, either, but I knew I liked sports. So I naively thought I would combine my interest in law with my interest in sports.

I decided I was just going to focus on what seemed like the best fit for me, which, in a way, was kind of like a gut feeling based on interactions I was having with the attorneys at each firm during recruiting. I figured I was going to spend a lot of time at the firm I ended up at, and I wanted to fit in well there.

To me, it became pretty quickly evident that was at Skadden. I can remember each interview I had at Skadden. It's kind of interesting that way. I felt very comfortable and at ease, which was contrary to a lot of the other interviews I had.

My jobs prior to this experience had been working in a warehouse or working in grocery stores taking inventory. They were not professional jobs. So these professional interviews were a little bit intimidating. I wanted to go somewhere where I felt I could be myself and not have to pretend to be someone I wasn't. That was very appealing to me because I think having to put on a mask every day you got to work — a proverbial mask, not the literal masks we're wearing to work these days — would be exhausting. The job can be tiring enough and can be stressful. I wanted to be somewhere I could be me. I thought that would be where I would thrive, and where I'd be happiest, frankly.

I was told by Skadden attorneys that the firm is a meritocracy, as I had been at a lot of different firms. That was sort of a common refrain throughout the interviews. But while it may have seemed hollow up to that point, for Skadden I actually believed them.

I guess it's not surprising that I came away from Skadden with those impressions because, as you likely know, the firm was founded more than 70 years ago by attorneys who were having difficulty rising up the ranks of one of the white-shoe firms of the day. They set out to do it in their own way. Even Joe Flom, himself, famously didn't even graduate college. He served in World War II, but became Skadden's first associate after attending Harvard Law School and went on to be one of the most successful corporate lawyers of all time.

That culture, that ethos has persisted to this day. I think at the firm everyone's work matters and is valued regardless of their background. I felt like I could see that when I was interviewing and it's been that way since I've been here. Everyone at the firm is integral to the service we provide.

Was it any more difficult for you to navigate an institution like your law school alma mater, Yale, than Skadden?

It's interesting, yeah. As I mentioned earlier, law school was kind of just the next logical step for me. I didn't really know what law school was going to be, I just knew I was going to be a lawyer. So that was the next step on the path.

So my approach to law school was very similar to how I navigated college. I went to Penn for undergrad. School was something I knew how to do, something in my control. I knew I can get out of it what I put into it. So I knew if I worked hard and paid attention, I'd do well and move to the next stage.

But, just like it was at Penn, I was surrounded by students from backgrounds that were very different than my own, many of whom came from wealth and privilege. On a day-to-day basis, I'd said I didn't really feel out of place. But there were moments that were subtle where I'd be reminded that I came from a different place. My personal background was going to continue to influence my career trajectory

I actually remember pretty well during my first year of law school I was getting sideways glances from classmates when I mentioned that I'd be working at a law firm that summer instead of interning at a public interest organization or for a judge or working as a research assistant. Those were the more common summer experiences for first-year students especially at Yale, which is very academia oriented, public-interest oriented

For me, every dollar mattered. I needed to have that summer job at the firm because that would reduce a financial burden on me for the second year. Maybe without needing the paycheck, I would have had more options available to

me. Like I said, I didn't really even consider clerkships like a lot of the law students at Yale who clerk after graduation. To me, it was just too big of a pay disparity, as compared to a firm position.

Ultimately, I think I viewed law school as more of a means to an end. And the end was a legal career that was going to provide much more financial security than I had growing up. And I think those were aspects of the law school experience that I think a lot of my classmates didn't necessarily share with me

Once I got to Skadden, I really didn't think that much about my first-gen background because it wasn't really a big issue. I actually don't even think many people knew about it, unless it came up in casual conversation. I never felt like I didn't belong or anything. I think a lot of the attributes of the first-gen experience are part of the fabric of Skadden.

When has it come up in your time at Skadden?

Ultimately I found out that the firm knew because when you make partner, you're introduced at this big annual partner retreat that we have. We haven't had it in the last couple of years because of COVID, but typically there's a big partner retreat annually. And at that retreat, all the new partners are brought up on stage and introduced by **Eric Friedman**, the executive partner. The very first thing Eric mentioned when he introduced me was that I was the first in my family to graduate college. He said it in such a way that it was a point of pride for him and for the firm. It wasn't something they wanted to hide. You could think maybe that it would be potentially detrimental. "Why are we making this guy partner? He doesn't have any real professional contacts in his family or his friends' circles. Maybe he's going to have fewer business-generation opportunities." But it wasn't that way at all. It was like a very prideful thing: "Matt was the first in his family to graduate college."

Then throughout the weekend, dozens of partners, some of whom had similar firsthand stories, would come up to me just to chat with me and learn more about my background. That was very reaffirming for me. It was many years after I made the decision to join the firm but it was the culmination. What I thought is, "I made the right choice here."

You're now one of two New York hiring partners at the firm. Tell me what that position entails and how your experiences as a first-gen lawyer shape your approach to that job.

I conduct a lot of interviews, obviously. I think it was close to 150 this season. We make a lot of offer decisions. I do think my experience, my firsthand background influences my approach to the role from time to time. If I'm reviewing

a resume or I'm interviewing students and I discover that the candidate is first-gen, that jumps out. That's a shared experience, a connection that we have. So often, when I'm talking to that student, even during the interview, I'll highlight my own background and experience. I think that puts a lot of those students at ease. Maybe this is a little bit of bias on my part, but I think they probably come with a little bit less confidence, at times, interviewing in a professional environment for the first time.

I think when I open up about my background, you can see a lot of times it puts them at ease. You can see them relax a bit. Then the interview becomes a lot more organic. For us, you can't help but admire the talent and the hard work, determination and grit, for lack of a better word, that many of the first-gen students have needed to display just to get to where they are today.

It's part of the Skadden ethos, in a way. Despite all the firm's success since its inception, I think many Skadden attorneys still have a little chip on our shoulders like we have something to prove to the world. No one at Skadden really acts like we've made it, or rests on our laurels.

We've talked about the advantages the firm has with first-gen lawyers. Are there challenges to being the size and scope that Skadden is in being a place that's welcoming to first-gen lawyers?

Maybe it's a little bit odd to say, but I think that the Skadden brand and reputation has a certain level of prestige and reputation that doesn't necessarily match what I've found to be the humanity of the firm. I said earlier I'll give my background and have the students tend to relax a bit. I think when you come to Skadden or law firms like it, your first instinct might be to be intimidated. You may also think it's not a welcoming place. But that's the opposite of what I found. I found it to be very welcoming to different backgrounds and personalities. Life experiences are frankly treated as an asset. I think, like anyone else, first-gen lawyers want to work on interesting and important matters, and they want to get top-notch training and a supportive environment.

It's weird: Students often ask me "What do you look for?" And they're probably expecting me to say something with respect to academic credentials. That's all sort of the baseline we know you're bringing to the table already. I'm just looking for good people. We rarely work alone. We're always working in teams and collaboratively. I think it's really important to have good people on your teams. It's important in your day-to-day for the happiness in your job. But it's also important for the clients because that's how we provide the service that they expect.