

ORTEGA

Neighbors

An exclusive magazine serving the residents of the Ortega and Ortega Forest Neighborhoods in Jacksonville



**INSIDE THE SKIN OF ATTORNEY
JOHN PHILLIPS**



Best Version Media

Photo Credit: Jennifer Mendoza

ATTORNEY IN WORLD-RENOWNED CASE HAPPY WITH LIFE IN THE “BUBBLE” OF ORTEGA

by Doug Milne, Jr. | Photography by Jennifer Mendoza



“You never really understand a person until you consider things from his point of view...until you climb inside of his skin and walk around in it.”

Harper Lee, To Kill a Mockingbird

At 6:45 p.m. on a Wednesday night, a Monster energy drink stood out among the stacks of papers and folders on John Phillips' desk in his Ortega Blvd. office. Donning an untucked oxford with rolled up sleeves following a long day, he sank into the couch next to the desk, pulled his phone from his pocket and began scrawling through text messages. He was looking for one in particular.

“I see Jordan all over you,” he said, reading the located text. The message had come from the father of the late Jordan Davis, Ron. Jordan, at the age of 17, was shot and killed on November 23, 2012 by Michael Dunn outside a gas station on Jacksonville's Southside.

Phillips, the Davis family's attorney, successfully convinced a jury to find Dunn guilty of first degree murder in October 2014.

But, just as his involvement with the case didn't begin as he imagined, it didn't really end as planned, either. In fact, given his attachment to the family now, it probably won't ever end. He had climbed into and walked around in the family's collective skin.

In hindsight, much about Phillips' path to the “bubble” of Ortega he now calls home isn't something he can say he saw coming.

Born and raised in Mobile, Ala., Phillips first visited Jacksonville with Ortega friends he attended law school with at the University of Alabama.

“It was a bigger, better version of Mobile,” he said. “Because of the NFL team and other, bigger-city things, Jacksonville had a lot of things Mobile didn't.”

Unsure as to where he would land out of law school, Phillips was offered a job with a Jacksonville law firm in 2001. Feeling he would work his way up the chain, he accepted the job.

Though he spent a lot of time with friends on “this side of the river” in Ortega, Phillips' first Jacksonville home was a rental property in San Marco. In 2007, a house came up for sale in Ortega on the water. He was in his bubble.

But, what bubble is complete without someone to share it with?

Angela Connor grew up in Greensboro, N.C., where she attended Chapel Hill for two years, before transferring south to the University of Miami. She would spend the next seven years in South Florida.

“Once I decided not to live in South Beach for the rest of my life, I started looking for other jobs,” she laughed. “I was actually looking in Chicago, New York and D.C....not Jacksonville.”

But Jacksonville, it turns out, was looking for her.

Offered a job in town to open the market for a restaurant group, she went from the southern-most part of Florida to the furthest north.

Among her roles with the job was sales and marketing for Whiskey River restaurant. For Valentine's Day in 2011, her boss decided to host a local celebrity date auction, with Angela being a central figure to its planning.

“Oh, by the way, you'll be the event,” her boss said. “I know you'll make it better by being in it.”

Not knowing many people in town, Angela sought the help from a friend and reporter with WJXT Channel 4. Among



During his first meeting at the Davis' home in Jacksonville, every TV station in town descended upon the Davis home. Phillips learned a national entourage of media was en route, as well. They family had not even buried the recently-slain Jordan.

Phillips' initial involvement with the Davis' came at the request from the family patriarch, Ron; "Come to Atlanta for the funeral and fend off media."

In a world where perception is often taken as reality, a scenario of bad timing, perhaps, gave media an open canvas to paint a picture which may have questioned John's sincerity over the Jordan Davis tragedy.

Exactly a week after Jordan's death, John's firm had scheduled their first-ever "Toys for Tots" Christmas party at his Ortega Blvd. office. The date had been on the books for months. The following morning, he was to hop on a plane to Atlanta for the funeral.

"At this small community party, all these media trucks started driving in," he recalled. "All the TV stations did live shots, showing *'Here's the attorney for Jordan Davis at a party with music.'* So, it really all started right here on Ortega Blvd. at this office."

By now, everyone knows the outcome of the Jordan Davis trial. Accused killer Michael Dunn will spend the rest of his life in prison, without the chance for parole. As the attorney representing the Davis family, Phillips was pleased with the outcome, but like the Davis family, he was changed forever.

"When John was doing law work before, it was a little more cut and dry, but this case was something that carried with him always. It still does," said Angela. "It was truly life-changing and put different values in perspective. It set a path that was quite divergent from what had been perceived to be a path before. So, just watching him go through it every day, such all-encompassing stuff, wasn't stuff he could compartmentalize and say *'I'll leave this at work.'* This was and is his life. As much as I wanted to make sure justice was served, I was also concerned about my husband. Watching the change had me in awe."

The case drew worldwide attention. As the family's lawyer, Phillips' face and name was in newspapers and on televisions everywhere. Several documentaries have even been made about the controversial case, which drew impassioned responses from all sides.

Out of the case came solicitations for John to join national news organizations as a legal analyst. He was even offered his own Tedx Talk. None of this was what he had signed up for, but the kid from Alabama who had carved out his path in life forged ahead.

"People hear the term 'personal injury' and it can be images of ambulance chasing," John said. "But, when you make it personal and get involved...when you do make yourself a part of their lives, you can't help by give up a part of yourself."

Growing up in Alabama, John spent time around the famed courthouse in Monroeville, setting for *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Before meeting the Davis family, Phillips had never known such truth and depth to Harper Lee's quote from Atticus Finch; "*You never really understand a person until you consider things from his point of view...until you climb inside of his skin and walk around in it.*"

John had indeed found himself in the Davis family's skin, and although it clearly affected his take on the world and sensitivity to

the local celebrities Angela and her friend recruited was local attorney, John Phillips.

"It was that evening when John and I struck up a friendship," Angela recalled. "He started hitting me up on Facebook, saying he wanted for photos of the event. We started dating a few weeks later." Marriage and kids would ensue.

At the time, John was with the law firm of Morgan & Morgan, though it didn't fit ideally with the model of independent representation he was used to.

"When I started this firm and this marriage in 2011, I did so really not knowing what the future was going to bring," John said. "I could have easily gone into commercial litigation and dealt with problems on paper, not of a personal nature. But, for whatever reason, I wound up in personal injury."

Prophetic words, indeed. With his career about to take another turn within the profession, that's when the course of his entire life would change.

Shortly after John and Angela began dating, he learned of his mother's illness back home in Alabama. She succumbed to the illness and passed away, not long before Angela became pregnant with the couple's first of two children. It was also in that year when he met the family of Ron Davis.

"Seriously, within 14 months, I went through ultimate loss, ultimate love of my newborn son and then sitting in the living room of what became the biggest case to come out of Jacksonville to this day," he said. "I didn't realize the impact the case would make. I felt I was just helping a family at the time to see how we could best tell their story."

all lives in that world, he also felt he was becoming a more refined version of who he had always been.

“To me, I’m still just Bennett’s dad,” John said of the couple’s first child, age four. “I still feel like I’m the guy who got his start in the rental office across the bridge in the church building. But, the Davis case did grow around us and it has been a bit overwhelming.”

“Living in this world of revolving tragedies is quite heavy. So, it does carry with him, Angela said. “It’s been adapting to a new normal after a new normal.”

Such is the beauty of life where change is all that stays the same.

John again looked again at his phone, scouring for a particular message from Ron Davis.

“Thank you,” John began reading Ron Davis’ words. “But, our work is not done here.”

John has been told he was pivotal in the life, death and re-birth of the Davis family. Perhaps. But, in doing so, he’s also become an even stronger foundation for his own family in his “bubble” of Ortega.

“At the end of all this, I’m going to step back and say to my kids, ‘This is what dad did. I hope you’re proud of something.’ I hope they are inspired to have a better start than I did. I was just living life day to day, working behind a desk and didn’t realize there was a level of love and compassion about this job I could have had all along.”

These days, John Phillips stays busier than ever in his “bubble.” The phone rings continuously. The Monster energy drinks remain a fixture. But, when home, office and St. Mark’s Episcopal Day School for the kids are all literally within a mile of each other, these days are also good.

As the Director of Sales for Sheraton, Angela does venture outside of the 32210 zip code for work, but the North Carolina and South Beach transplant does return to her family’s Ortega home, where life is good. After all, Angela and the boys have him right where they want him.

“They have me wrapped around their finger,” he said, smiling. “And there’s no place I’d rather be, nothing I’d rather be doing than spending time with her, Bennett and Weston.”



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