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JASON B. SHEFFIELD
TRIAL LAWYER FEATURE



TRYING TO CREATE A COMMUNITY OF INNOCENCE

Attorney Jason B. Sheffield

By Jan Jaben - Eilon
Photography Jeremy Adamo

Walking back and forth in the courtroom, arguing his case in front of a judge and jury, Jason B. Sheffield could be an actor playing the role of an attorney. After all, before he decided to attend law school, he acted in local and national commercials, small independent films and industrial videos, as well as musical and non-musical theater. Although he has since given up his acting career, he likes to point out the parallels between the story telling of acting and the practice of law. “I have a passion for telling stories and helping people,” says the partner

at Decatur-based Peters, Rubin & Sheffield, P.A. who, as of last year, is also a novelist.

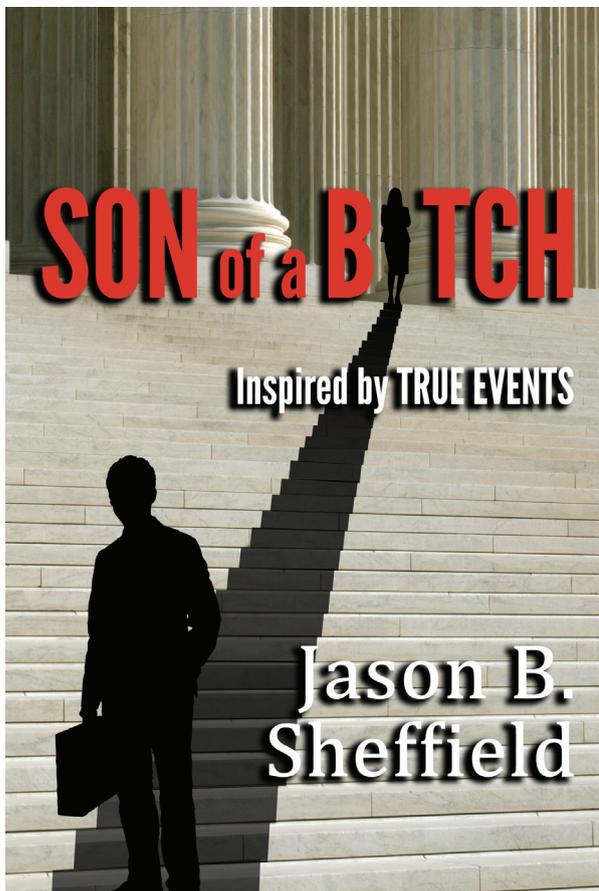
Whether reading, writing or practicing law, Sheffield is drawn to the flawed characters in a story. That’s probably a good thing since he is a criminal defense attorney. So, as he did as an actor taking on a new role, Sheffield digs deep into the character of his clients to truly understand who they are and their story of innocence or why they might have committed the crime they are accused of. “I am attracted to people and their truth,” he says.

“To truly help people, you must understand both sides of an issue. Some people have made mistakes and you need to understand the root of the person to find out why they did something. Find the root of the problem. That’s the counselor part of what we do,” says Sheffield. When he gave up acting to go to law school, “I felt it was like seeing behind the curtain of life. You see their true intentions. Law let me learn and arrive at the truth. Truth is more fascinating than fiction.”

As lawyers, he says, “We are telling stories. We are searching for the truth to tell to our clients and their families, and to prosecutors, judges and juries. When I look at what I do in my practice, I am creating the opportunity to tell the truth to these people to get the best results for my clients. Story telling is what unites us all. We are taught story telling at a young age. It’s what binds us to our families.” Simply put, he says, “What I do for a living is make presentations and the work we do is getting ready for those presentations. We are trying to dig as much as we can to know our clients and to understand how they came to their predicament.”

Many criminal defense attorneys want juries to see the greys in the client’s story, to create doubt. “That is not how I practice. I say, here is my truth, and if I can work hard enough to find that truth, I am more likely to exonerate my client. Otherwise, it’s not satisfying. But I must dig deeper and know where to turn to find the truth.”

Sheffield’s career certainly took several turns before he found his true calling in criminal defense law. Oddly enough, it may have been sitting right in front of him the entire time. A graduate of Georgia State University College of Law and the National Criminal Defense College, Sheffield is the son of a criminal defense attorney who is a post-conviction specialist, so he grew up with criminal defense law. Prior to attending law school, or even



acting, Sheffield earned a Bachelor of Science degree from Clemson University in Biology/Pre-Medicine, focusing on chemistry and bio-chemistry. He thought he wanted to be a doctor.

Sheffield's maternal grandfather was a small-town doctor. "I've always loved science and biology and helping people. I was on that career track." But he worked as an emergency medical technician at Children's Healthcare of Atlanta and at Scottish Rite and "met the business side of being a doctor which was disconcerting. The doctors were tasked with having to deal with insurance red tape. I was more fascinated by the science and thrilling nature of medicine and I was adrenalized by its emotional aspects even though it was sad. However, I found I could compartmentalize. You need the skill of being 30,000 feet above it to help people."

Sheffield took that skill to his current career. "In criminal defense, people are also in the middle of a crisis. A lot of cases have medical aspects. I can read medical records. Many times, the people who come to me have been accused of physical or sexual assault, rape, molestation or shaking babies cases. The most difficult cases are very challenging."

According to Sheffield, most of the accused who hire him to defend them have a component of depression or anxiety or undiagnosed mental illness. "A lot of clients have a long history of working with mental health providers. My goal is to be inclusive to the family and person. I'm trying to create a community of innocence or support. Oftentimes clients get abandoned by family and friends."

Sheffield, who is an adjunct professor at Emory University School of Law, teaching about the use of experts in criminal and civil trials, feels fortunate to have had remarkable lawyers as mentors. "My first employer was Dwight Thomas, a criminal defense lawyer. Through him I was exposed to cultural differences and he was inspirational in his approach. He had been instrumental in the desegregation of schools. I gained a lot of insight into the African-American community. He was also a masterful criminal defense attorney. I worked for him for a year and a half in law school, and then two years after graduating."

That's when Sheffield joined Doug Peters and Bob Rubin. "That's when I started taking over more challenging cases and I em-

braced my background. I learned client management and the way to build my practice to suit my personal needs and goals, so the practice doesn't cause me to lose my family or career. I've been here 10 years."

Sheffield describes himself as a right-brained person who is trying to develop the left side of his brain. "Both Bob and Doug are masterful story-tellers and obsessive over details. For me, as a story-teller, I welcome the environment as I needed training for left-brain details," which he says he is learning from his partners.

Still, Sheffield finds ways to express his creative side. Last July, he published his first novel. He chose the title, "Son of a Bitch", "to spark debate. I wanted to tackle old euphemisms and put a



AT A GLANCE

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- Supreme Court of Georgia, 2005
- U.S. District Court, Northern District of Georgia, 2006
- U.S. District Court, Middle District of Georgia, 2006
- 11th Circuit Court of Appeals, 2006
- 3rd Circuit Court of Appeals, 2011
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- GACDL Georgia Association of Criminal Defense Lawyers
- NACDL National Association of Criminal Defense Lawyers

Professional Awards:

- President's Award, Georgia Association of Criminal Defense Lawyers
- Super Lawyers Rising Star
- National Trial Lawyers Association Top 100
- US News and World Report Best Law Firms

Family:

- Married, 2000
- Children: 11 and 8

new spin on it. Although it was inspired by true events, and there are a lot of emotions and experiences the book captures, it quickly moves into fiction when the criminal defense attorney mother gets involved with her client and asks her son – also a criminal defense attorney – to defend her.”

According to Sheffield, when he called and told his mother the title of the book, there was a long pause on the phone. However, she loves the book, he says, and he’s hoping that some day it could be made into a movie. Moreover, Sheffield believes there are at least three more books on this mother character, and he’s already writing the prequel.

In the book, Sheffield says he wanted to “create an impossible situation that can be survived. That’s how I feel about some of my cases. We start at the darkest places, but there has never been a case that I haven’t been able to find some solution, even though it may not be a good solution.”

For an attorney, the best compliment he can receive is a non-guilty verdict or dismissal of a case for his client. But as a writer, he wants the reader to reflect on his own life and see a new way of looking at their problem. “I’ve had people say I had a tough relationship with a parent and you showed me a way to resolve those issues and gave me the belief that I could work things out,” recalls Sheffield.

For the past few years, Sheffield has served as treasurer of the Georgia Association of Criminal Defense Lawyers and is a member of the National Association of Criminal Defense Lawyers.

When he is approached by someone who wants to become an attorney, Sheffield says he lets out an exasperated sigh. “You’re taking on an enormous responsibility. It’s a tough career, but what motivates people to do this is that they can take on authority and challenge perceptions of authority. It’s a thrill to stand up in front of the authority which accused my client and say, ‘wait a second. We’re going to have the opportunity to tell our side of the story.’ I want people to like me and I hope to educate people to seek the truth. I have to insist on having the opportunity to have a voice.”

A quick writer, Sheffield describes himself as a washcloth that soaks up water. “I’m constantly soaking up ideas and it’s just a matter of squeezing them out.” Although he loves his career and wants to continue defending clients and writing and telling stories, “eventually I want to sail into the sunset with a computer laptop in hand and tell my stories. But I can never see myself getting away from law. I want to ride out these two passions for the rest of my life. Being a lawyer, I bring my performance and creativity and storytelling to my career and my clients.”