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From the King of Pop to Katten's Top

Litigator Zia F. Modabber is Katten Muchin's new LA managing partner

By Steven Crighton
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Becoming Michael Jackson's trial lawyer wasn't as formal of a process as Zia F. Modabber expected.

He'd handled day-to-day legal work for the pop star on behalf of Howard Weitzman, Jackson's primary trial lawyer, but in 1995, when Weitzman temporarily left private practice, Modabber inquired about taking over with Jackson.

"I knew him, but not well. I called Michael's assistant, told them that Howard was leaving and I wanted to see if I could sit with Michael. A few hours go by, days. Then I get a call that 'Michael wants to see you in New York tomorrow,'" Modabber recalls. "I said, 'Fine, I'm on a plane.'"

In Jackson's top floor suite at the Four Seasons, the two talked about everything but legal representation — where they grew up, where they went to high school — Jackson asked what it was like growing up as a Jewish kid in the Valley and whether he was interested in the music business.

"He asked me about a zillion questions, just a really curious guy. Then we goofed off for about half an hour and he said, 'Alright, great. Thanks for coming,' and I said, 'Alright, so, wait. Can I be your lawyer?'" Jackson was a bit caught off guard. "He said, 'Well, yeah! Of course. I'm not even sure why you're asking,'" Modabber recalled.

Serving as the King of Pop's courtroom attorney is one of the bigger feathers in Modabber's legal cap. He added another sizable one last month, when he became managing partner for Katten Muchin Rosenman LLP's Century City office.

Modabber replaced Joshua Wayser, who left in January to become a Los Angeles Superior Court judge.

It's been a big change, Modabber admits. Though he's used to managing casework for the likes of Trent Reznor, Chevy Chase, Aerosmith, and Lance Armstrong, managing a law office is something else entirely.

"I've run the litigation department here for well over a decade, but it's very different," Modabber said. "I understand what litigation is, so working with litigators sort of came naturally to me. But being the managing partner of the office, my job is to help out everyone."

Every day, Modabber says he's learning more and more about the various departments that work out of the office, from real estate to intellectual property to corporate finance. He's learning what they do, who their clients are, what their needs are, and how they interact with the other practice groups.

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Gail Migdal Title, a former managing partner of the firm, said she's been impressed with Modabber ever since watching him articulately and passionately argue with a veteran's ability in his very first case as first chair.

"I was just blown away by how talented he was, and I told him that. I said, 'You've got a big career ahead of you,'" Title said. "And look how prescient I was."

His trial skills have earned him praise from attorneys who have worked with and against him.

"He's the rare litigator that has a



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sense of sort of balancing the deal," said Donald Passman, a partner with Gang Tyre Ramer & Brown Inc. with whom Modabber has butted heads in court. "A lot of litigators fall into the gladiator's category where they take no prisoners, but Zia has a practical balance."

John Branca, partner at Ziffren Brittenham LLP, Jackson's primary attorney and now co-manager of his estate, said he brought Modabber onto the estate following Jackson's 2009 death not just for consistency's sake, but because he always handled Jackson's courtroom affairs with a measured hand.

"Zia's always been very responsible, very intelligent, and with great judgment," Branca said.

Title says Modabber has all the qualities that make for a good firm leader; particularly, an interest in its people. Firm partner David Halberstadter said that's evidenced by Modabber's curiosity to get to know everyone at the firm, from the newest associate to the most senior partner.

"He's pretty much been here since the inception of this office, so he not only has an incredible amount of institutional knowledge, but a great, long relationship with the management, the administration,

and the staff," Halberstadter said.

Litigation co-chair Gregory S. Korman will transition into being the litigation department's sole lead. Korman said he knows he's got some big shoes to fill, having worked closely with Modabber since his first year at the firm.

"He's really shaped everything that I do now," Korman said. "He's a pleasant guy to work with. It always helps to be led by someone who you know has the group's best interest at heart, and for sure, that's Zia."

Even as an office head with over two decades of experience under his belt, Modabber admits he's still occasionally starstruck, like when he received a call from Stevie Wonder about a year-and-a-half ago.

"You learn to get over that quickly, though. Your job isn't to be a fan. When they call you, they're calling for help," Modabber said.

He's even resisted the urge to snap a photo with them, save for Reznor, which may have earned him some respect from his 15-year-old daughter, a big Nine Inch Nails fan. Even as the attorney of some of the world's most famous musicians, impressing your kids is tough.

"I don't think your kids ever think you're cool," Modabber said, laughing.