

# A veteran of same-sex legal battle, South Carolina lawyer uses her powers for good

By Brian Cox



South Carolina attorney Jacqueline “Jax” Pavlicek freely admits that she tends to be competitive and has a rebellious streak. “If you tell me I can’t do something, that then becomes the number one thing I want to do,” she says with a laugh, adding that she was the cause of all her parents’ gray hairs during her teenage years. “I own that.”

Born and raised in Lemon Grove, Calif., a city in San Diego County, Pavlicek grew up around people from all walks of life. The community, where Spanish, Tagalog, and other languages are commonly spoken, contributed to her appreciation of diversity. She attended Helix High School with future NFL stars Reggie Bush and Alex Smith, and her interaction with outstanding high school athletes produced an early interest in sports medicine.

Her father worked as a sandblaster in the shipyards for years before taking an engineering job at a local beach and tennis club, while her mother worked in special education, helping children with learning disabilities to read.

“I grew up watching my parents work very hard, and I don’t know how to do it differently,” says Pavlicek. “There is no half-assing anything in my family.”

Though Pavlicek’s grandmother often suggested her precocious and obstinate grandchild should be an attorney, Pavlicek wasn’t particularly interested in the law until she was a student at Grossmont College, where the fields of criminal justice and psychology drew her attention. She had the opportunity to learn from adjunct faculty who had hands-on experience working in criminal investigations and forensic analysis. She began to consider a career in law enforcement.

Later, when she transferred to San Diego State University, she was introduced to political science and constitutional law by a particularly dynamic professor, Dr. Madhavi McCall, who hooked Pavlicek on justice theory. Professor McCall brought constitutional law alive for Pavlicek.

A prosecutorial function class, led by an experienced Assistant United States Attorney, provided Pavlicek with her first glimpse into how the concepts learned in her criminal law courses were applied in enforcing criminal laws. Another course, taught by Superior

Court Judge Blaine Bowman while he was still a prosecutor, opened her eyes to the wide range of possibilities the legal profession offered.

“I think it was taking that course with Judge Bowman when it started clicking for me,” says Pavlicek, who helped found the first chapter of the pre-law fraternity Phi Alpha Delta at San Diego State. “My going into law was very purposeful and accidental at the same time.”

Law school appeared to present an answer to a question Pavlicek had taken to asking herself: How could she use her powers for good?

With her future husband, Adam, she traveled across the country in a car that had no air conditioning to attend the University of South Carolina School of Law, where she went “all in,” committing to 12-hour days of classes and studying. “I determined early on that I was going to be as involved as I could be and give the absolute best effort I could,” she says, “because I was taking a gamble.”

She joined her law school’s chapter of DRI, helped found the Gun Educational Law Society, and served on the Editorial Board for the South Carolina Law Review. Additionally, Pavlicek earned her way onto the school’s mock trial team, where she and her teammates competed in various out-of-state mock trial competitions.

Though it took time to become accustomed to the South Carolina heat, and she occasionally begged friends in San Diego to overnight her a burrito from her favorite taco shop, Pavlicek quickly felt at home in Columbia.

Over her 1L summer, she worked for a firm where her interest in labor and employment law was sparked. “People’s identities are so tied up in what they do for work that when there’s a transition, whether it’s voluntary or involuntary, there’s a lot that goes into that,” says Pavlicek. “When something happens, it can be very nerve-racking for them, and I love talking to clients about what they can expect and what’s unlikely to happen. I like acting as a sounding board.”

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**A native of California, Jax has made Columbia, S.C., her home since earning her J.D. at the University of South Carolina School of Law. She is special counsel with the Trucking Defense, Professional Liability, and Construction Practice Groups at Collins & Lacy, P.C.**

During her 2L year, she worked as a law clerk for the Senate Judiciary Committee, where she worked on legislation dealing with the environment and elections. The experience served as a tremendous civics lesson on South Carolina's legislative branch.

Though she had made plans to join a law firm in Atlanta toward the end of her 3L year, she opted instead to take a staff attorney position with the South Carolina Court of Appeals, a move that she describes as among the smartest career decisions she's ever made.

"It was an awesome experience because it allowed me to get a comprehensive view of what an appeal looks like and how it gets made," she says. "It was a cool opportunity to see how all the different judges operated."

Over the next two years as a staff attorney, Pavlicek screened appeals, worked up appellate motions, and drafted bench memoranda, opinions, and orders. By the time she left the Court of Appeals to enter private practice at Callison Tighe in Columbia, she had the framework, education, and experience to serve clients "right out of the gate."

"I enjoy being able to help navigate a situation that normal people don't encounter all the time," she says. "It is a point of pride to me to be approachable and accessible to my clients."

While at Callison Tighe, Pavlicek worked with Nekki Shutt and M. Malissa Burnett, two attorneys with whom she would have the opportunity to work on impact litigation that brought about historical changes in South Carolina, including the case that brought marriage equality to South Carolina. She describes her work on the marriage equality case as being a "that's-why-I-went-to-law-school" moment.

"I feel very fortunate to have played a part in that," she says. "It's a source of great pride for me. We were able to represent some wonderful folks who were interested in getting married but didn't have the ability to do that."

Later, when that practice group broke off from Callison Tighe to form a new firm, Burnett, Shutt & McDaniel, Pavlicek went with them. From marriage equality to battling for licensed practical nurses who were miscategorized as contractors, Pavlicek was thrilled to be fighting in the trenches in cases that mattered and moved the law forward. She also developed a "low-bono" practice helping to secure name changes for transgender and non-binary minors.

"Representing a kid who just wants to live as their authentic self were some of the best moments that I've experienced in my career," says Pavlicek. "It's deeply emotional. Folks like to stand on a soapbox and talk about these concepts in the abstract, but when push comes to shove, these people are living those concepts right now and need help."

Soon after having her daughter, Pavlicek felt ready for a change of pace and, in 2019, accepted an in-house position in the City of Columbia's city attorney's office, where she served as the city's labor and employment attorney, a role that involved work in the areas of civil rights and employment law. During her tenure, she helped guide the city through the turbulent and uncertain times of the COVID pandemic. She also served as an interim police advisor for the police department, drawing on her knowledge of the criminal justice field to work with members of law enforcement.

After about five years with the city, Pavlicek found she missed the collegiality and collaborative environment of working in a law firm environment. She joined Collins & Lacy, P.C. in May 2024 as special counsel in the firm's Trucking Defense, Professional Liability, and Construction Practice Groups.



**Known for her distinctive sense of style, Jax enjoys vintage shopping and says her favorite color is glitter – but she's not afraid to clown around on occasion.**

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Collins & Lacy is a business defense firm that delivers legal representation for clients through solid preparation, execution, and client-oriented service aimed at success. With offices in Columbia, the firm represents local, regional, and national clients in the areas of construction; retail/hospitality and entertainment; insurance/bad faith; products liability; professional liability; commercial trucking; mediation; governmental affairs/issue advocacy; and criminal defense.

“For me, it’s all about who you’re working with,” says Pavlicek. “Collins & Lacy has always had an amazing reputation. Our firm is well known for litigating, and I have been a fan of trial ever since I used to do it playing pretend as a kid.”

Litigation, after all, appeals to both her competitive and her rebellious sides.