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Rising Star: Goldstein Borgen's Raymond A. Wendell

By Sarah Martinson

Law360 (July 14, 2020, 3:35 PM EDT) -- Raymond Wendell of Goldstein Borgen Dardarian & Ho reached multimillion-dollar settlements with three major cities that require them to install thousands of curb ramps for people who use wheelchairs, and he struck a \$6.5 million-dollar deal with American Airlines for customers who were wrongly charged for their checked bags, earning him a place among the class action attorneys under 40 honored as Law360 **Rising Stars**.

HIS BIGGEST DEAL SO FAR:

One of the first cases Wendell worked on after joining Goldstein Borgen was a **\$1.4 billion settlement** that required Los Angeles to make its sidewalks more accessible to people who use wheelchairs and scooters by installing curb ramps and repairing crumbling pavement.

While Goldstein Borgen was negotiating the deal, the city was striking an agreement with other litigants suing over claims that Los Angeles' sidewalks and curbs were not compliant with the Americans with Disabilities Act's accessibility requirements. The competing deal wouldn't have provided disabled individuals with as much relief as Goldstein Borgen was fighting for, so the law firm objected to it, Wendell said.

The judge in Goldstein Borgen's case enjoined the other settlement, which was appealed, Wendell said, adding that he worked on fighting the appeal.

"It was one of the first sidewalk curb ramp cases to settle in a way that makes a big difference for people with disabilities in Los Angeles," he said about the firm's 2016 settlement that provided relief to 280,000 disabled individuals in Los Angeles.

HIS MOST RECENT WORK:

Wendell continues to fight for disability access under the ADA in sidewalk and curb ramp cases. He reached two settlements in 2017 with Long Beach, California, and Seattle that require them to install thousands of curb ramps.

In the Long Beach case, the city agreed to **spend more than \$180 million** to install up to 4,500 ramps within the first five years of the deal. By 2023, the settlement is expected to result in a curb ramp at every street corner where one is required under federal or state law, according to Goldstein Borgen.

Wendell played a significant role in reaching the settlement with Seattle by winning court approval of the deal, according to the law firm. Under the arrangement, Seattle must dish out roughly \$300 million to install more than 20,000 curb ramps throughout the city in the next 18 years, according to Goldstein Borgen.

"I love that the ADA was passed with bipartisan support, and the idea that people with disabilities should be integrated into society, and that powerful entities should have to sacrifice a little bit to make that happen was pretty noncontroversial at that time," Wendell said.

HIS PROUDEST MOMENT AS AN ATTORNEY:

So far Wendell's proudest moment was reaching a \$6.5 million settlement with American Airlines for consumers who were promised that they could have their bags checked for free. Each consumer who filed a claim received a 100% refund, and about 190,000 verified claims were filed, Wendell said.

The settlement was reached quickly in 2018 after the case was filed in October 2017, which Wendell attributed to his team's flexibility in how they approached the structure of the deal. The deal received final approval in April 2019, according to Goldstein Borgen.

"It was a challenge to bring that case for a class because there were different reasons why people were charged for bags that they were supposed to be able to check for free," Wendell said.

HIS MOTIVATION FOR BECOMING A CLASS ACTION ATTORNEY:

Wendell is motivated to be a class action attorney by his desire to help people. Through class actions, people who don't have the resources to file lawsuits can



Raymond A. Wendell
Goldstein Borgen

Age: 35
Home base: Oakland, Calif.
Position: Associate
Law school: Harvard Law School

get relief for wrongs against them, he said.

"There are so many people who for a variety of reasons don't have the access or the time or the ability to vindicate their own rights in the legal system," he said.

HOW HE SEES THE LEGAL INDUSTRY CHANGING:

Over the next 10 years, Wendell believes that the class action industry is going to shift away from focusing on corporate profits and turn its focus toward other values. He said that in the future class action attorneys are going to have to be flexible in the type of cases they handle and be receptive to ideas they might not have been open to before.

"Young lawyers, particularly class action lawyers, have a great opportunity to be leaders in that change," Wendell said.

— As told to Sarah Martinson

Law360's Rising Stars are attorneys under 40 whose legal accomplishments belie their age. A team of Law360 editors selected the 2020 Rising Stars winners after reviewing more than 1,300 submissions. Attorneys had to be under 40 as of April 30, 2020, to be eligible for this year's award. This interview has been edited and condensed.

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First job after law school: Law clerk for the U.S. District Court for the Southern District of California