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The Dark Knight

*Steve Stodghill:
caped crusader of law*

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The Dark Knight

Holy transactions and litigation! Steve Stodghill comes to the rescue for all his famous clients

*By Alison Macor
Photography by Larry Marcus*





Stodghill with friends: Batgirls Anne Stodghill and Jerry Hall

Backstage with Todd Wagner, Jay Leno and Mark Cuban

Have some Madeira, Ma Dear. Wining and dining Elizabeth Hurley.

Steve Stodghill is an unlikely comic-book geek.

The affable 42-year-old litigator, a principal in the Dallas office of Fish & Richardson and attorney to Dallas Mavericks owner Mark Cuban, is recounting one of his favorite moments from DC Comics' 1997 re-launch of the Justice League of America series.

"There's a plotline where these martians take over the earth," Stodghill explains. "The head martian has captured the whole Justice League, except Batman. He's got Superman trapped in kryptonite chains, the Green Lantern, Wonder Woman — he's got control of all of the superheroes. Except Batman. He sends out all of his martians in different groups to try to track him down. All of a sudden, each of the groups stops reporting in. The martian leader gets very frustrated. He says, 'What's happening here? He's only one man!' And Superman looks up from his chains of kryptonite and whispers, 'The most dangerous man on Earth.'"

"That pretty much encapsulates what Batman's about," says Stodghill. His fascination with Batman, the Dark Knight who battles villains with brains instead of superpowers, pretty much encapsulates what Stodghill is about.

Dressed in a well-tailored dark pin-striped suit accented with a Mavericks-blue patterned silk tie, he wears stylish black eyeglasses that add a funky edge to his otherwise conservative ensemble. His airy suite on the 50th floor of the Bank One Center is filled with Batman artifacts. Framed original comic-book drawings by Bob Kane and Neil Adams jockey for wall and shelf space among Picasso etchings, Fiji war clubs, and other decorative objects in an office that local attorneys have dubbed the Stodg Mahal.

A comics fan since the age of five, Stodghill likes that the stories pit good against evil. Says Fish & Richardson managing principal Tom Melsheimer, who has known Stodghill since law school at the University of Texas, "He can quote chapter and

verse of the Justice League probably better than *Roe v. Wade*." Stodghill has also never wavered in his loyalty to the Dark Knight. "Batman always has the deck stacked a little higher against him, yet he always prevails."

Given the details of his suburban Dallas upbringing and his early successes as a litigator, it is difficult to imagine Stodghill with the deck stacked against him. It seems as if he's led a charmed life, one that has become infinitely sweeter since 1999 when clients Mark Cuban and Todd Wagner sold their Internet company, Broadcast.com, to Yahoo for a reported \$5.7 billion. Stodghill got in on the ground floor, investing \$15,000 in Broadcast.com in 1994. (In 1998, the company went public, beginning at \$18 a share. Less than a year later, after Yahoo bought in, shares were worth about \$110 each.) Along with the money have come opportunities for Stodghill the film buff to rub elbows with movie stars like Robert DeNiro and Al Pacino as Cuban and Wagner have expanded into filmmaking.

Wealth, celebrity, power — it seems as if he has it all. Will success spoil Steve Stodghill?

On a warm spring evening in mid-May, Stodghill leaves his office and maneuvers his black Mercedes SL500 convertible through rush-hour traffic to the American Airlines Center. Involved in more than fifty pieces of litigation as lead counsel for clients such as Fossil, Alcatel, and American Football League organizer Lamar Hunt, Stodghill is at this moment more concerned with how well Mavericks guards Steve Nash and Nick Van Exel will fare against the Sacramento Kings in Game 5 of the conference semifinals. "We've got to shoot well and play some defense," mutters Stodghill as he's waved into the VIP parking area underneath the arena. He navigates a warren of corridors and security checkpoints, steps into an elevator, and exits into the pre-game frenzy of the arena's concession area. Stodghill orders a Miller Lite and flashes season tickets to the usher as he's escorted to his third-row center-court seats.

Until last year, Stodghill served as the Mavericks' chief counsel, which may explain his choice seats. These days he's on retainer and, according to team president and CEO Terdema

Ussery, acts as a kind of counselor for the Mavericks' legal matters. During the course of the evening, in fact, Stodghill will receive a voice-mail message from Ussery, and after the game, the two will huddle together just inside the tunnel to the locker room, talking animatedly.

Moments before tip-off, Stodghill settles into his chair and points out some familiar faces. Cuban sits across the court in his usual spot near the team's players, watching their and the referees' every move. (Notorious for racking up fines for berating referees and running onto the court, he will be remarkably restrained during this game.) Cuban's wife, Tiffany, sits two rows in front of Stodghill and a few seats down from colorful former Mavericks owner and founder Don Carter. Nike chairman Phil Knight, in town for the annual EDS Byron Nelson PGA tournament, is a few rows back.

Although Stodghill and Cuban are in frequent contact, Stodghill doesn't see much of his celebrated client during crucial periods in the Mavericks' schedule. Indeed, Cuban rarely takes his eyes off the game, but he does make a brief post-game stop to kiss his wife as he heads into the locker room with the team.

The lawyer and his client met through Wagner, Cuban's college roommate who became his business partner and who also worked with Stodghill as a young associate at Akin, Gump, Strauss, Hauer & Feld in the late

eighties. Stodghill had clerked for the firm while in law school, and he counts the late Jack Hauer, one of the firm's partners, as a mentor.

He credits his father, Don, a real estate lawyer and a former assistant district attorney under Henry Wade, with inspiring him to pursue law. The family ranch also influenced his decision.

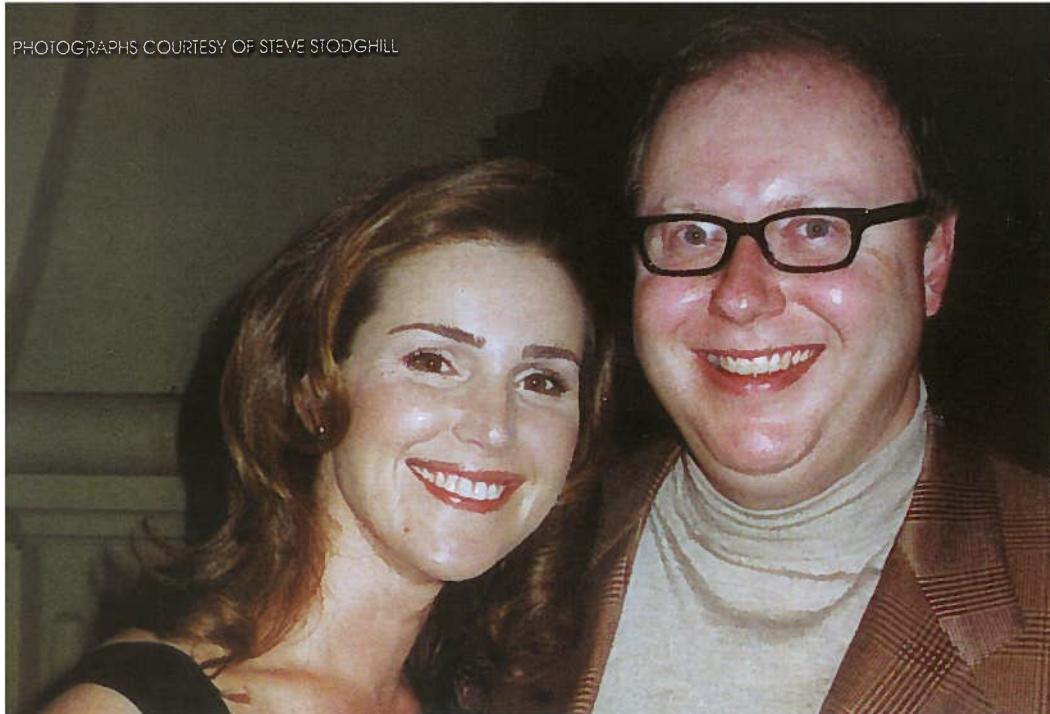
Originally owned by Stodghill's paternal grandfather, the 100-acre Bar S Ranch is in Rockwall, northeast of the Forest Hills area of Dallas where Steve and his younger sister Sheri grew up. During summers off from the University of Texas, where as an undergraduate Stodghill majored in government,

he would work on the Bar S plowing fields or giving the cattle their shots. "But the worst job was the oats-shoveling job," he remembers. "It's not air-conditioned in the silo. During the Texas summers, it can get well over one hundred degrees. All the oat dust would get into your clothes and your skin. You'd be breathing it in," he says with a shudder. "Studying didn't seem so bad," laughs Stodghill. "Law school, good. Oats, bad."

In 1993, Stodghill left Akin Gump to open a boutique litigation firm with partners Melsheimer and Mike Lynn (Jeff Tillotson would become a name partner a few years later). Barely in their thirties, the young litigators struggled to build a client base. When Stodghill successfully defended the wife of an old friend in a case against fashion designer



Stodghill with his grandfather at the Bar S Ranch



The lawyer is listening to *Frasier*'s Peri Gilpin.



To Stodghill they're Liz, dearest and Matt.



An hour spent with Chris Tucker is a rush.

Victor Costa in 1995, the firm hit pay dirt. The case received national attention, including a mention in *Newsweek*.

"Law is his calling," observes Wagner. "There's a sense of good versus evil, and there's a sense of finality. There's a winner and there's a loser. Steve's a very competitive person, and he does not want to lose."

Cuban, for one, appreciates that kind of drive. "Steve's mind is always working on your case, and I like that," he says. "I'm not an expert in litigation, but Steve has one quality I really like: He wins."

A phone call from Cuban precipitated Stodghill's next career move. Having decided to purchase the Dallas Mavericks for a reported \$280 million, Cuban got his lawyer on the phone. As a commercial litigation firm, however, Lynn, Stodghill, Melsheimer & Tillotson was not able to negotiate the corporate transaction. "It was initially an advantage to have a boutique firm that focused on litigation," says Stodghill, "but my practice had come full circle. I felt like I needed to have a national platform to service my clients' needs beyond litigation."

He and Melsheimer had been working with Fish & Richardson's Washington, D.C., office on some of their technology-related cases, and the firm tapped them to open a Texas office in 2000.

Founded more than a century ago, Fish & Richardson handles cases involving intellectual property and corporate law as well as litigation.

Stodghill's career has come full circle in another sense; he now works across the street from Akin Gump. He and Melsheimer flipped a coin for their very plush but very different offices. "Mine's a little less Gordon Gekko and a little more Ward Cleaver," jokes Melsheimer, who is married with children.

Stodghill wed Anne, an attorney who specializes in employment law, in 2001. "She was a fact witness in a lawsuit," he says, a bit sheepishly, of their initial meeting. They ran into each other at a happy hour six months later, where they bonded over a shared love of opera. "That was what finally cut through all the nonsense," jokes Anne, "after he tried every line he ever learned as a frat boy at the University of Texas."

Although Stodghill declines to say exactly how well he did financially when Cuban and Wagner sold their company to Yahoo (he still owns some stock), his wife is more forthcoming. She notes that the windfall helped them throw a lavish wedding for 600 guests at the Dallas Museum of Art, where members of the Dallas Opera performed an aria from *La Boheme*. They've become



Stodghill and his wife, Anne

involved in numerous charitable endeavors, and in 2002 they chaired a benefit that featured Tony Bennett and raised nearly half a million dollars for Special Care and Career Services, an organization that works with young people who have developmental disabilities. The Stodghills also have indulged their love of art.

"Neither one of us is very trained in art appreciation, but we have an emotional reaction to it," Anne says. Paintings by Andy Warhol and Roy Lichtenstein and other pieces from the Stodghills' private collection fill the walls of Fish & Richardson's Dallas office. In his private office, a large whimsical painting titled "Rite of Spring" hangs against a dark paneled wall across from his desk. It depicts enraged orchestra patrons heaving a brash composer out a window. The piece is by Christian Vincent, an artist married to actress Peri Gilpin (Roz Doyle on TV's *Frasier*), whom Stodghill has known since the sixth grade.

Gilpin, who considers her childhood friend a "bad-ass lawyer," has come to understand the relationship between his art and comics collections. "That's one of the great, quirky, wonderful things about him. It's like when you find out somebody's into Metallica. It doesn't seem to compute. But he appreciates fine arts, and he considers comics a part of that."

Dozens of framed photographs fill the shelves behind Stodghill's desk. Anne and Steve's wedding portrait sits next to a photograph of his groomsmen, a group that included Wagner as best man. Actress Elizabeth Hurley, whom he met through Cuban, has become a friend; she smiles and hams it up with Stodghill in a number of informal snapshots. Stodghill's impressive weapons collection, begun with a gift from Anne when they were dating, lines one windowsill.

"It's like a museum in there," observes Usery. "I'll go into Steve's office, and we may have some very important matters to discuss, but the first ten minutes may be his showing me some sword that he found in the jungles of Africa."

He has sat courtside with Courtney Love, shared steaks with actor-comedian Chris Tucker (*Rush Hour*), and hosted

wrap parties for Hurley at his and Anne's University Park home. Stodghill says he probably will never grow tired of jetting off to Cannes or the Tribeca Film Festival and hanging out with celebrities. As long as he sticks with Cuban and Wagner, he'll continue to enjoy such perks. He seems to delight in telling others about these events almost as much as he enjoys the experiences themselves.

"He truly started charting his path at a very young age," says Gilpin of Stodghill's seemingly charmed existence. "It didn't just cover 'I want to be a lawyer.' Each chunk of his career and life has been planned out, and as he makes things happen, he's absolutely delighted. Most people don't even see what they've created. They only see what they don't have. Steven's definitely a glass-half-full kind of guy."

Stodghill now has money, success, and even famous friends, but one thing's for certain: he'll always be a comic-book geek. Oddly enough, it may be what keeps him grounded.

When Stodghill and Melsheimer first moved into the Bank One Center, Stodghill gave his partner a Superman lithograph to hang outside his office. Melsheimer likes to remind Stodghill that Superman has all the powers, while Batman's just a smart rich guy.

As he shows off more of his memorabilia, Stodghill launches into one final, telling story. In 1997, Frank Miller's graphic novel, *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns* was re-published. Its adult themes, says Stodghill, "really turned the comic-book world on its head." Miller's story features a 50-something Batman who has been forced into retirement by a totalitarian government. He wanders the streets of Gotham City seeing a wasteland of crime, pollution, and corruption. Batman decides he's had enough, and he comes out of retirement to continue his fight against evil. The government sends Superman to defeat the Dark Knight. "In the world of comic books, having Superman and Batman fight to the death, it's just the ultimate," says Stodghill.

And the ending?

"I'll give you a hint," he grins. "Batman wins." ♣

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Thomas M. Melsheimer

Matthew E. Yarbrough

Steven H. Stodghill

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**“HIGH PROFILE LAWYERS. HIGH STAKES CASES.
WITH CLIENTS NAMED EDISON, BELL AND THE WRIGHT BROTHERS,
IT’S BEEN THAT WAY FOR 125 YEARS.”**

One is a former United States Attorney. Another represents Mark Cuban. A third has been consistently recognized as one of the state’s top trial lawyers. Fish & Richardson’s attorneys are among the most high-profile in Texas. Emphasizing intellectual property, litigation and corporate law, they have the legal skills and smarts to back it up.

Fish & Richardson is a 125 year old firm that once represented inventors Thomas Edison, Alexander Graham Bell, and Orville and Wilbur Wright. Today, 325 lawyers in eight offices nationwide represent great innovators who work in cutting-edge technologies and industries.

Fish & Richardson opened its Dallas office in 2000. “We started with six lawyers and now we’re up to nearly 40. The growth has been driven by the boom in technology litigation,” says Tom Melsheimer, managing principal. “But, we’re also involved in a broad range of complex commercial litigation, everything from anti-trust to white-collar criminal defense and False Claims Act litigation.”

Versatility and legal savvy might explain the firm’s success. “We’ve got a lot of high-profile lawyers. These lawyers have already distinguished themselves and been recognized for their achievements,” says Melsheimer, the trial lawyer, who has been recognized by the *National Law Journal* for engineering the nation’s top defense verdict. He points out that seven of the nine partners in the Dallas office were named to the Super Lawyers list. One is Rhodes Scholar Paul Coggins, who was appointed U.S. Attorney by President Clinton in 1993 and served the Northern District of Texas for eight years. Melsheimer and Coggins both rank on the Super Lawyers Texas Top 100.

Meanwhile, Super Lawyer Steven Stodghill has represented Mark Cuban for almost 10 years and has served several years as Team Counsel to the Dallas Mavericks. (Steve is profiled in the companion *Texas Super Lawyers* magazine being distributed statewide to members of the State Bar of Texas.)

Another high-profile Super Lawyer is Stephen Fox, selected as one of the “Best Lawyers in Dallas” in the field of labor and employment law. Matt Yarbrough is a past member of the *NLJ*’s “40 Under 40” ranking of the nation’s top young litigators. Kevin Gray was also named one of the “Best Lawyers in Dallas.” Recent addition Wes Musselman, a former Examiner with the U.S. Patent Office, focuses on domestic and international patent and trademark prosecution. He strengthens an already formidable Intellectual Property Group.

They’re smart and passionate about their work. The firm’s high-profile status is merely one more reason why Fish & Richardson is a firm to watch.

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Unless noted, Not Certified by the Texas Board of Legal Specialization.