

Breaking the Ice: Connecting through design thinking, Design Lab

■ TODD NELSON

Faegre Drinker partner David J.F. Gross brings his affinity for human connection – with clients, jurors and team members – to his work as a trial lawyer and co-founder of Faegre Drinker’s Design Lab.



David J.F. Gross

Gross now is helping to lead a new larger iteration of the firm’s design lab, unveiled in September in Scottsdale, Arizona.

“What I love about being a trial lawyer, first and foremost, is the connection with people,” Gross said.

“That’s probably why I love design so much. It’s [about] what would be helpful to the user.”

The Design Lab, launched in 2017 at the firm’s former Silicon Valley office in partnership with Stanford University’s Legal Design Lab, uses design thinking to help clients solve legal problems.

Through a design process, Gross found he could explain crystallography to jurors using tennis balls. That helped the trial team he was leading win a complete defense verdict in a billion-dollar patent infringement trial.

Name: David J.F. Gross

Title: Partner, Faegre Drinker; co-founder, Faegre Drinker Design Lab

Education: B.A., political science, University of Minnesota; J.D., Harvard Law School

Q: Best way to start a conversation with you?

A: I love to talk about books I’m reading. I just finished “Hannibal: Rome’s Greatest Enemy,” by Philip

Freeman. It’s about this general who, against all odds, fought Rome in 200 BC. The only way he was able to win battle after battle with Rome was his connections with people. I thought, wow, Hannibal would be a great trial lawyer. He’s willing to work with people, he’s willing to lead people, he’s willing to connect with people and he’s super creative and unconventional.

Q: Why law school?

A: My dad (the late Donald E. Gross) was a state court judge in Ramsey County for many years. I’d watch my dad in court and think I would love to be in a courtroom. We had a family of seven, and my dad said to everyone, “Don’t be a lawyer,” because back then it was hard to get work. He said there’s too many lawyers. But I remember thinking, I’m not sure there’s too many good lawyers, and I think if I try really hard, I could be a good lawyer.

Q: Pet peeve?

A: People not spending time together in person.

Q: Best part of your work?

A: The people connection.

Q: Most challenging?

A: The chance that you will lose the trial. My client, whenever we lost a case, would be devastated. I’d be devastated. The irony by far is I learned more from losses than from wins. They made me such a better trial lawyer. I was able to say, why did we lose? What can I learn from the other side? What can we do better?

You do need losses in your career, but they’re really painful. Fortunately, we haven’t had many of them in the last few years.

Q: Favorite activity away from work?

A: I love learning new technology and using it for fun and collaboration. The Insta360 camera takes 360-degree video. We spent two hours going over videos on how to make it work. When people visit, we’ll do 360 video and send it to them.

Q: Where would you take someone visiting your hometown?

A: In Scottsdale, we’re 1 mile away from Camelback Mountain and next to Fashion Square Mall. When we had visitors during the partner retreat, we had breakfast at the mall and walked up Camelback Mountain just enough to feel the heat. That’s remarkable, going to a law office, hiking a mountain and then going back to your meeting.

Q: Legal figure you admire?

A: Justices [Antonin] Scalia and Justice [Stephen] Breyer. When you talked to them, they were very warm-hearted and clear in their communicating. I love the idea of judges who are clear and speak plainly and communicate well. They are two legal scholars I admire and love to try to emulate in the way they communicated.

Q: Favorite book, movie or TV show about lawyers?

A: “Dateline.” I love watching real lawyers talk about real trials and the choices and decisions they made.