

RIVERSIDE COUNTY: Firetag for the defense



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Chad W. Firetag, at age 34, has gained a standing as an Inland-area defense attorney that most lawyers don't reach until later in their careers — a reputation for connecting to jurors in court and as a sought-after legal brief writer.

He is the chief financial officer for the [Riverside](#) County Bar Association and on the board of The Leo A. Deegan American Inn of Court, the local chapter of an organization that promotes professional conduct and best practices among lawyers.

In his most recent high-profile case, Firetag represents Mark Kirk, former chief of staff to [San Bernardino](#) County Supervisor Gary Ovitt, in a conspiracy and bribery in government corruption case.

After Firetag wrote a dismissal motion in Riverside County's San Jacinto corruption case, scores of charges were thrown out, the case narrowed, and seven of the nine defendants eventually entered plea deals.

But for James Duncan Hawkins Jr., a 37-year-old Fontana man facing a third-strike conviction that could have sent him to prison for the rest of his life, all that mattered was that Firetag was his trial attorney in September.

Hawkins was charged with a late-night home burglary and assault in Murrieta after an initial arrest for evading police in his car. Firetag, Hawkins said, challenged every part of the case, including whether he was actually fleeing an officer.

Jurors in the Southwest Justice Center returned verdicts Sept. 14.

“I was really unsure,” Hawkins recalled. “I thought it might have been a hung jury. Then they were saying, ‘not guilty, not guilty, not guilty,’ and then, ‘guilty.’ I looked at Chad, and he grabbed my hand and smiled and said ‘Don’t worry, it’s a misdemeanor.’ ” Hawkins said he could have kissed him.

Hawkins said in a phone interview that he had attempted suicide while the charges were pending, “But I didn’t do it the right way, thank God.” He said he planned to try again if he faced a three-strike sentence.

“Chad was literally fighting for my life, not a life sentence. I wasn’t going to do that amount of time,” Hawkins said.

Firetag’s courtroom style was free of histrionics or witness-hammering, Hawkins added. “He did not attack them, but he identified their flaws,” Hawkins said.

“I told him, ‘Chad, you are not wasting your time.’ I got my job back, I am attending church, and I am talking to my girlfriend about getting married.”

In an interview that took place before Hawkins’ trial, Firetag said: “If the prosecution is zealous and has high standards, then I think it’s just as right for the defense to have that as well.

“Without it, you have one side so much more powerful than the other, and you have no one arguing for you,” he said.

“Chad doesn’t miss a fact, he doesn’t miss the law. Every day there would be something from him that would be well-researched and well-litigated,” said Riverside County Assistant District Attorney Sean Lafferty, who has faced Firetag in court. “Jurors like him. He is very charming and charismatic. As a prosecutor, you obviously have your work cut out for you,” said Lafferty, who now oversees the Indio office for the district attorney’s office.

LOCAL ROOTS

Firetag is a Riverside native who attended Jefferson Elementary School, Chemawa Middle School, Arlington High School, and [UC Riverside](#) for his undergraduate degree. He attended [UC Davis](#) for his law degree and was admitted to the bar in 2001.

His [path](#) to becoming an attorney was guided by neither family nor familiarity. As a sophomore at Arlington , he heard a recruitment pitch from chemistry teacher Sheri Harris, the moderator for Arlington’s mock trial team.

“There were no lawyers in my family. I never knew a lawyer, I never met a lawyer up to that time,” Firetag recalled recently in his downtown Riverside office. In fact, he was considering studying for the ministry after high school.

But “Cross country was in the fall, and track was in the spring, so I had something to do in the wintertime. And that’s how I got involved.”

Firetag was designated a bailiff for the first year, but mock trial attorney-coach Steve Harmon recalled him saying, “I’ll be the best bailiff you’ve ever seen.”

By his senior year, Firetag was the captain of the Arlington team that won the 1994 mock trial national title. It was capped by finals in Chicago, with half of Arlington’s team sickened by food poisoning and taken to a hospital. Firetag was not among the stricken, although he was ill from a cold and exhaustion.

It was a test, Harris recalled, of Firetag’s leadership, and the 17-year-old came through. He helped to comfort and keep his teammates focused, then told the moderators they wanted to compete, she said.

“I represent my school, my city, and my state, and we are doing this,” she recalled Firetag saying. “This is our shot and we are going forward.”

Firetag, Harris recalled, held the king-size gavel trophy during the entire flight home. By the end of high school, he had formed a bond with Harmon, was seriously thinking about law school — and had met his future wife, Victoria Linton.

Firetag, Victoria and their two small sons live in Riverside. His brother, Nicholas, is an attorney with the Riverside office of Gresham Savage

FINDING a CALLING

Firetag was in his third year at law school when he was hired by an [Orange](#) County civil litigation law firm. But he wasn’t happy there, he admitted.

Harmon, his longtime mentor, knew why.

“I always told him, ‘You are a criminal defense lawyer, not a civil litigator,’ ” Harmon said. “ ‘You like the challenge and the trial work, and that is where your strength is.’ ”

As it turned out, Harmon’s colleague Paul Grech had an opening in his office. Grech, who said he first noticed Firetag’s talents when scoring a high school mock trial, hired him as an associate in 2002 and eventually made him a partner.

“He quickly became the go-to guy for writing complex motions and appeals for the criminal de