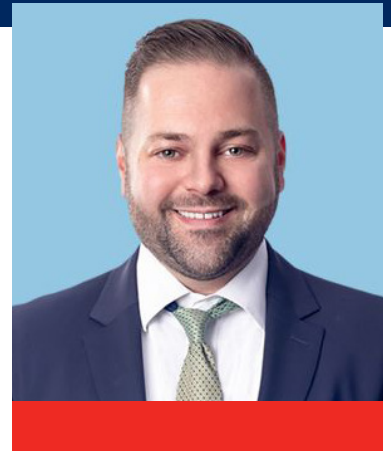


Get a ‘Lyfe’

Michigan attorney makes name for himself in the improv world



By Brian Cox

Attorney Michael “Mike” Smith’s commitment to fostering a positive, supportive culture at the Michigan law firm where he is a co-managing partner is no laughing matter.

He has, what some might consider, a surprising side gig.

Back in 2012, Smith took a class at an improv theater near his home in Clawson, a northern suburb of Detroit. He thought it might bring an added dimension to his trial work as a young defense lawyer. Being on a stage with no script in front of a hundred people seemed far more daunting than arguing in front of a jury.

While he enjoyed the rush from performing and made a lot of friends in the community of improvisers, he never expected the experience would lead to the creation of a social media sensation called “Wayne County Lyfe” that now has hundreds of thousands of followers and millions of views across TikTok, YouTube, Facebook and Instagram. It’s even sparked branding deals, commercials, and collaborations with celebrities such as actor Dax Shepherd and singer Fred Durst of the band Limp Bizkit.

“I had no idea it would develop into what it has,” says Smith. “It started out as just a fun thing for my friend and I to do on the weekends and it has blown up beyond what I ever would have expected.”

Smith and his friend, Garrett Fuller, are the creative minds behind “Wayne County Lyfe,” a short sketch video series based

on characters inspired by real people Smith and Fuller know from growing up in southeast Michigan. They initially had concepts for only seven videos when they launched the series eight years ago. The first clips involved Fuller as “Cody Baddenhoop,” an Eminem-wanna-be who was trying to convince a judge not to send him to jail for stealing a cigarette machine. Smith plays Cody’s cousin, Duncan Stanko, who is always behind the camera, and who is definitely not a lawyer.

Smith says the improv duo was happy to get a couple hundred views on their first several videos.

Over time, the sketches evolved to include other beloved characters – Uncle Terry, Dip Cup, and Traylen – and offered short snippets on scenarios involving everyday life in Metro Detroit. It was a 2019 sketch about the popularity of all-black Dodge Rams that was Smith and Fuller’s first video to go viral, garnering some four million views.

“I like to say we were an overnight success... three years in the making,” jokes Smith, who continues to be a faceless voice off-camera and is responsible for editing and posting the videos, as well as managing all of “Lyfe’s” social media platforms.

“I’ve purposely kept a distance from being on-camera and I do a lot more of the behind-the-scenes stuff,” says Smith. “My background in law has definitely helped for reviewing contracts and negotiating brand deals.” It also helped when it became apparent that this was not just a hobby, and an LLC needed to be formed.

The videos became so popular that Fuller quit his day job a few years ago to work full-time on the sketches. He and Smith produce and post at least one video a day and have started discussing ideas for staging a live show or a television show.

Smith is similarly in the process of considering next steps for Cardelli Lanfear Law in Troy, Mich., where he is co-managing partner with Jason Newman. The pair, who became partners together in 2017, took over managing the insurance defense firm last year.

“We both have different strengths, so we decided to divide up the duties,” says Smith, who has taken to heart an insight from writer and businessman Gary Vaynerchuk that “your employees don’t work for you, you work for your employees.”



Friends Garrett Fuller (left) and Michigan attorney Mike Smith met in an improv class. The duo are the creative minds behind the popular online comedy sketch series “Wayne County Lyfe.”

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The sensational response to “Wayne County Lyfe” has led to a host of opportunities for Mike and Garrett, including attending last year’s Detroit Lions’ playoff game against the LA Rams.

“We want a culture where people enjoy coming to work,” says Smith. “We have bright attorneys and really good staff who do a great job. I have to work hard so everybody can do their job.”

Born in Royal Oak, Mich., a northern, inner-ring suburb of Detroit, Smith had little exposure to the legal profession growing up. His stepfather was a truck driver, and his mother was an administrative assistant at an area hospital. As a kid, he was into comedy, sports, video games – and he was a serious baseball card collector.

“That was the only thing I ever spent money on,” he recalls. “Other kids were spending money on toys and candy, but I always thought baseball cards were a good investment.”

Though he collects less frequently now, he maintains an extensive collection, including a set of 1969 Topps gems that feature Reggie Jackson’s rookie card and Mickey Mantle’s last card. His stepfather entrusted the cards to Smith when he was only 10.

“I think he knew I would take good care of them,” says Smith. “Those are special to me, for sure.”

Uncertain about a career path when he went off to college, Smith majored in accounting at Michigan State University because he thought the field was a good foundation for business. He decided even before graduation, however, to pursue a law degree once he realized that conducting audits didn’t hold much appeal for him.

“I’m happy to understand the books of my own business and be able to talk with accountants, but I didn’t want to do that specifically,” he says.

He enrolled at Wayne State University Law School in Detroit without a clear understanding of what kind of law he might want to practice. After his 1L, he applied for a law clerk’s position at a small firm that was actually looking for second-year candidates. Smith

received a call at noon that the firm had had a cancellation and invited him to an interview at 2 p.m.

“That was the day I learned to tie a tie from a video on the internet,” says Smith with a smile. “I was thrilled to have my foot in the door to the legal profession.”

Smith stayed with the firm through law school and for three years after. He felt a strong loyalty to them for hiring him as a 1L. Smith cut his teeth on the firm’s main diet of municipality defense and civil litigation.

In 2010, Smith joined Cardelli Lanfear and proceeded to make an impression over the next two years by getting 14 litigated cases dismissed without payment to the plaintiff. His practice now focuses primarily on trucking litigation, automobile negligence, contractor liability, premises liability, and commercial litigation.

He credits the mentorship of Carl Lanfear as a significant force behind the development of his practice. Now, looking back over the course of his 17-year career, Smith says he has noticed a shift in clients’ expectations.



Mike and his wife, Tasha Brady, were married last year after connecting during the COVID pandemic

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“One of the things that is becoming more evident is that clients want you to be more of a risk manager than a risk taker,” he says. “They want to have the whole picture, and they want efficient results. They want a quick resolution if it can be had. On liability cases, our clients want to pay what is owed, no more, no less. And they want to do so as quickly as possible.”

It is critical to foster relationships with opposing counsel now more than ever, says Smith. A scorched-earth approach to a case is unlikely to benefit his client down the road.

Smith and his wife, Tasha, just had their first child. They named their daughter Fern, after the city of Ferndale where the couple met. The Smiths recently celebrated their one-year wedding anniversary after meeting four years ago during COVID. They were next-door neighbors who began spending time together during the lockdown. The final months of 2023 were a bit crazy in their lives.

“One of my wife’s favorite jokes is that at the end of 2023, we got married in September. I became co-managing partner in October. We got a puppy in October and found out she was pregnant in November, and I started taking blood pressure medication in December.”

Smith is a past chair of the Primerus Young Lawyers Group, which he joined about 10 years ago. Primerus has been an invaluable resource for the firm, he says.

“I thought that was a great experience from start to finish, making relationships with folks who at the time were all young attorneys,” he says. “It’s like you’re practicing the art of networking, but you really are learning together and building fundamental relationships. Now I’m a co-managing partner of my firm and I’ve got other friends who have gotten to that point, too. When I’m making a referral, it’s a lot easier to tell my client, here’s somebody that I trust and know that they’re going to treat them like their own client.”



Mike and Tasha recently had their first baby, a daughter named Fern.

As Smith continues to take the lead in Cardelli Lanfear’s development, his focus within the firm is providing associates and legal assistants with a clear path toward success and honest communication about their role in the firm’s future.

“Younger associates have to want to stay because they’re going to have recruiters reaching out to them left and right,” says Smith. “People won’t entertain another job unless they have a reason to. The main thing to me is to have people feel like this is a home that they want to stay at for their career.”