

During his junior year at Vance High School in Henderson, Jim Roberts was the starting point guard on a basketball team that went 26-0 and won the state championship. While he doesn't have a perfect record in the courtroom, his winning record there has earned him a reputation as the state's top construction lawyer.

Raleigh-based Lewis & Roberts is among the state's largest commercial-litigation practices. Formed in 1997, it has grown to 30 lawyers and added offices in Charlotte and Fairfax, Va. Roberts, 47, litigates and arbitrates cases for practically every type of participant in the construction industry, including building owners, general contractors, subcontractors and surety companies, which provide bonds on construction projects.

He enters the fray when a structure has been built improperly. That's led him, for example, to litigate a case for the owner of a hotel that had severe foundation defects and to arbitrate a dispute for a shopping-center owner who alleged improper construction.

In recent years, Roberts and his firm have taken on synthetic-stucco cases. Synthetic stucco is a building material used as an alternative to brick and other siding. The material is designed to keep water out. When moisture gets inside, it stays there. That can cause mold, attract termites and lead to other problems. The firm has won more than \$55 million for individual homeowners. He's working on a class-action synthetic-stucco suit, certified last year, in the U.S. Middle District Court of North Carolina.

"Around here, we call Jim 'the bulldog,'" says John Thompson, owner of Raleigh general contractor JM Thompson Co., which Roberts has represented for nearly a decade. "If he gets into something, he won't let go. And if he thinks you are in the right on a matter, he will go to the wall for you."

Roberts has based his practice on a simple rule: "Be prepared." He modeled his work ethic after William Taylor Jr., a founding partner of Raleigh-based Maupin Taylor PA, where he started his law career. "Taylor always told me, 'The judges you appear before can figure out who's shooting straight.' So when I get involved on a case, I try to have it thoroughly and completely prepared."

That often means burning the midnight oil. "All I can say is, Jim must have a very understanding wife," Thompson says. "I've known him to work many weekends, even when he's sick, preparing for a case."

His specialty is construction, but a personal-injury lawsuit led to his most high-profile case. He defended Jean-Claude Van Damme when an extra sued the star for the loss of his eye after Van Damme struck him with a prop knife during filming of the movie *Cyborg* in Wilmington. "It was probably the worst movie I've ever seen," Roberts says.

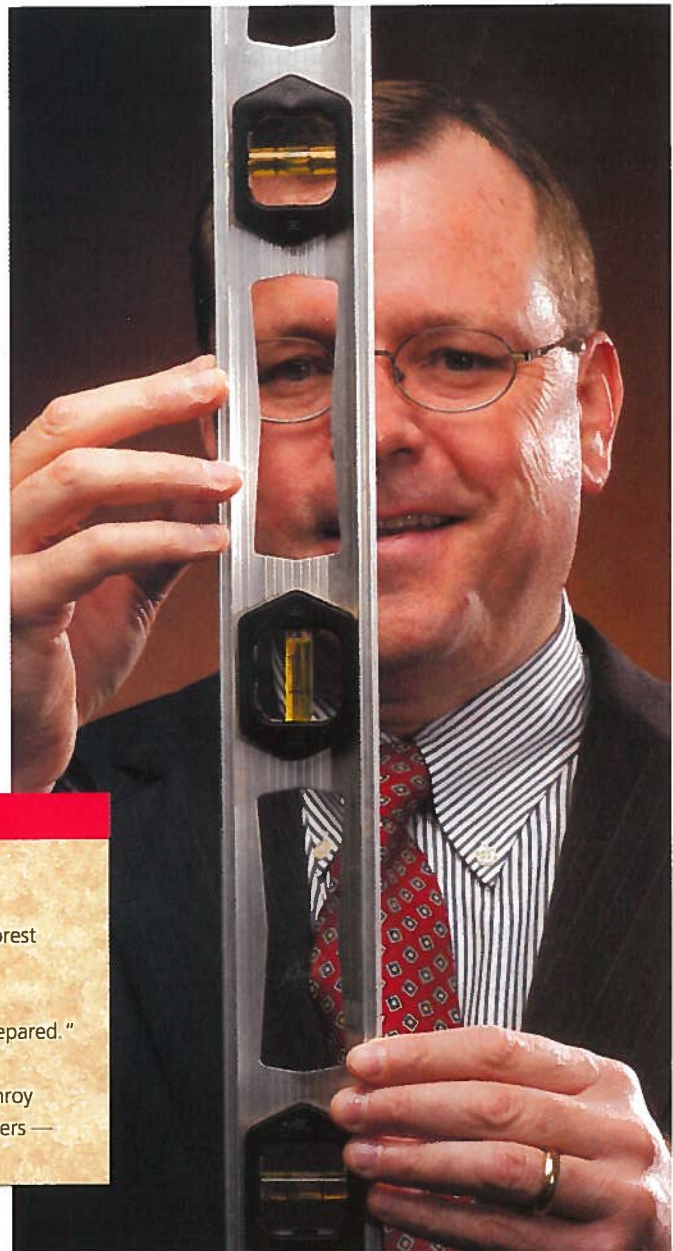
The case went to trial in Cumberland County, and the film's insurance company hired Roberts to represent Van Damme. The jury found the star liable, but it wasn't a total loss for Roberts. Court TV broadcast the trial, and he got plenty of national exposure.

Roberts says he can't remember ever wanting

to be anything other than a lawyer. He studied history at Wake Forest as an undergraduate, then enrolled in Wake's law school. After graduation, he moved to Raleigh to work for Maupin Taylor.

"I wanted to be in litigation from the start," Roberts says. "Practically all my career has been spent in courts or in arbitration." His enthusiasm for jury trials has not diminished over the years. For him, it's just like the thrill of sinking a buzzer-beating basket. "There's no feeling like waiting for a jury to come back," Roberts says. "When the verdict's in your client's favor, it's nothing short of exhilarating."

— Kathy Brown



JAMES ROBERTS

Lewis & Roberts PLLC, Raleigh

Born: Sept. 5, 1956

Education: bachelor's, 1979, law, 1982, Wake Forest University

Family: wife, Annie; five children

Roberts' rule: "Be completely and thoroughly prepared."

Favorite pastimes: duck hunting and fishing

Last book he read: *My Losing Season* by Pat Conroy

What keeps him grounded: changing dirty diapers — two of his children are under 3 years old