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McKool Smith Associate Gets Patent Issued For Study App

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For three semesters in undergraduate school at Texas A&M University, McKool Smith associate [Kyle Ryman](#) studied civil engineering.

He had a passion for engineering. He thought like an engineer. And he was doing well in his classes. But the so-called War on Terror was raging and the San Antonio native had specifically chosen to go to A&M to commission into the infantry. He was looking at five years to complete a civil engineering degree, more than the U.S. Army had offered to pay.

The young college student pivoted to history, a decision that eventually steered him toward law school after his military service. But he never truly left engineering behind. While in law school, Ryman and a friend he made in the Army developed an app that utilized a study method called spaced repetition – the same technique used by popular language learning app Duolingo.

The U.S. Patent and Trademark Office issued a patent to Ryman's app, which he named Scholati, at the end of January.

"I don't see a whole lot of difference between engineering and the law," Ryman told *The Texas Lawbook*. "I think both fields approach problems very similarly. You're just using different tools and you're operating on different things. On the law I'm kind of operating on society ... the law is engineering for society."

Ryman and his wife, Niki Ryman, are evidence the app works. Ryman was a top scorer of the July 2021 Texas Bar Exam (he placed third, albeit behind a first place and two test-takers who tied for second). Niki Ryman, an internal medicine doctor in the Austin area, used the app to study for a board certification exam. She said she scored better than average in all categories when she took the 2021 test.

Now an intellectual property and business disputes lawyer, Ryman is looking to donate the patent and code base to a university or educational non-profit to help others study for the bar exam. He said he's specifically looking to donate the app to an institution with a displayed commitment to improving student academic outcomes, not just a "brand name" university that admits "smart students."

"I want this to go to a university with a population of students who the university is already investing resources in, supporting academically and helping to raise that population up," Ryman said.

Ryman and his co-inventor, Jackson McGehee III, closed down their startup company to focus on their careers and families after filing a non-provisional application in March 2022. The idea of monetizing the patent didn't appeal to Ryman and McGehee.

"I really wanted to stay focused on the users. I really wanted to make people better at studying," said McGehee, who added that he believed in Ryman's vision.

The two chose the name "Scholati" because they wanted to play on "scholar." But finding a domain name with something like "scholarly" that wasn't already taken proved a challenge, Ryman said. They settled on an "ati" ending – pronounced like "Illuminati."

Ryman credits his military training, in part, for the app's inception. In the Army, he was a "very systems-based commander." His style was to plan ahead, to synchronize things, and do things routinely. He said this practice developed a system going into law school for "attacking academics."

At the University of Texas School of Law, Ryman would build outlines from his lessons that would grow to as long as 100 pages, he said. He'd then convert the outlines to flash cards, an arduous task that took hours he didn't have as a new dad. His first child was born in the spring semester of his first year in law school. His second child was born while Ryman was doing a clerkship for Justice Nathan Hecht on the Texas Supreme Court, before he took the bar exam (the couple now has three children). Ryman had close to 10,000 flashcards leading up to the exam in July 2021.

"You only have so many hours in the day and especially if you're like me with a spouse with her own professional career and kids in the house, I don't have 18 hours a day to commit to law school," Ryman said.

The app he and McGehee created allowed him to significantly cut down the time spent converting the outlines to flashcards, which gave him more time to effectively study the material on the flashcards.

His wife said she used the app to study while she exercised on the treadmill and waited in store lines. She'd even give him feedback, which he incorporated into the app, "at least for me," she said. By the end of it, Ryman was writing some of the code himself.

After filing the non-provisional application in 2022, Ryman further tested the app on some other law students who found success using it. But as Ryman's clerkship was coming to an end – this time for Judge Don Willett with the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Fifth Circuit – he felt he was at a crossroads. Growing the app could easily be a fulltime job, and he wasn't willing to pivot from the legal career he'd begun to build. So he and McGehee shut down the operation. But the patent process still played out while they moved on and Ryman began practicing patent litigation.

Ryman's experience building the app and applying for the patent has given him some common ground with clients. He understands the engineering challenges that inventors are trying to solve.

"It's not intimidating to me to actually look at an invention and really dive deep and understand what has been invented and why it's different from what we like to call prior art," Ryman said. "I'd say that's where the real value is. I can understand technology, especially software patents because that's what my invention is."