



AAJ members reflect on their careers as trial lawyers—from how they got started to what keeps them motivated.

# A Childhood Dream Fulfilled

By || GWEN-MARIE DAVIS

Because I have a desire to help the underdog and go to battle for those who are injured or treated unfairly, being a plaintiff trial lawyer is the perfect fit.

Ever since I was a little girl, I knew I wanted to be a “layer.” What is a “layer,” you may wonder. It is how my 7-year-old self spelled lawyer on an “About Me” assignment. I excitedly knew from early elementary school what I wanted to become. I also knew that becoming a lawyer would require dedication, lots of reading, and hard work. But I knew that I could do anything that I put my mind to.

I also seemed to have a knack for public speaking from an early age. I spoke in churches, schools, assemblies, oratorical contests, family functions, and private events. My mom worked with me on enunciating my words and eye contact. She enrolled me in a public speaking

course, and with continued practice, I felt more confident in my skills.


I was also quick on my feet. And although my quick thinking—where I would “talk back” and seemed to have an answer for everything—would sometimes get me into trouble, I was encouraged to use this trait for good and to follow my dreams. (I was also counseled that as a lawyer, I would need to know when to be silent or when to just say, “yes, your honor” in the courtroom.)

With the right mentors, I became a trial lawyer. And because I have a desire to help the underdog and go to battle for those who are injured or treated unfairly, being a plaintiff trial lawyer is the perfect fit.

Being a plaintiff trial lawyer has

provided me with meaningful work. My goal is to advocate on behalf of my clients with purpose, competence, and zeal to provide satisfying results. I want them to know that I have their best interests at heart. I work hard on their cases, and this gives both me and my clients a sense of pride that we are fighting for justice. As Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. said, “Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.” Also, protecting my clients’ access to the courts has become part of my mission as a trial lawyer. If there is a law that is not helpful to my client, then I work to be the change advocate.

It is my belief that once you are a trial lawyer, you should constantly sharpen and perfect your skills. Keeping current on the latest trial advocacy skills is extremely important to me. As a member of AAJ, I have access to the best legal minds—and their collection of thoughts and ideas to tackle case strategy. Being engaged in AAJ and active in my state trial lawyer association has been critical for myself as a trial lawyer and helpful to my clients.

The little girl who wanted to be a “layer” is now a proud trial lawyer. And I will continue to protect and fight for clients who seek justice and equity from powerful corporate giants. 

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# My Most Memorable Case

By || NEAL S. ZASLAVSKY

There are many reasons a case might stick with us and serve as a reminder of why we entered the legal profession. A case that I handled several years ago is one that I will always remember. It wasn't the largest verdict that a client ever received or the most hard-fought victory. What makes this case particularly memorable is how the result was truly life-changing for a modest, hardworking family.

This rewarding experience came from a pro bono case I handled after meeting a family at the legal aid clinic where I volunteered. The family's needs were beyond what I could provide during a brief consultation at the clinic and beyond the scope of the assistance the clinic provided, so I invited them to my office later in the week to follow up.

What I learned was that a notoriously unethical eviction mill in Los Angeles was trying to unlawfully evict the family. The head of the household was a hard worker who had lived and raised his family in the home since emigrating from Mexico nearly four decades earlier. Due to strong renter protections in Los Angeles County that limit annual rent increases for existing tenants, the family was paying below-market rent. The new owner of the duplex knew that she could likely get at least double—if not triple—what my clients were paying if she were able to re-rent the property at the current market rate.

After dealing with the immediate crisis and defeating the bogus eviction proceeding, I did a deep dive into the family's entire tenancy to make sure


there were no other obvious hazards they faced with the new landlord. I discovered that there had been an unlawful 10% rent increase back in the 1980s—when it should have been significantly less. As such, I contended that every subsequent rent increase was “fruit from the poisonous tree” and therefore had to be rolled back. Faced with litigation to collect 35 years of overcharges—under a statute that also provided for treble damages and attorney fees—the landlord ultimately agreed to a settlement.

The settlement provided life-changing money for this family. Not only did they get a lump-sum payment up front, but I was able to negotiate a decrease in their rent to just \$500 per month—the last monthly rental amount before the first unlawful rent increase. Under the settlement, this new monthly rental amount could be increased annually only by the small increments allowed under the ordinance. The settlement also provided that the family's now-adult son, his wife, and their two children could continue living in the house under these

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same terms even after their parents were deceased.

In a city where a similar duplex would have rented for about \$3,000 per month at the time, this result had an enormous impact for the entire family. While the head of household otherwise lacked the financial resources to leave a nest egg for his only son, he could now pass along a safe, affordable home.

I turned down the family's offer of payment; the only thing that I would accept from them was a home-cooked dinner with the family to celebrate. And I asked them to promise me that if their landlord ever tried to take advantage of them again, they would give me another opportunity to protect their rights. This is why I became a trial lawyer. 

**Neal S. Zaslavsky** is the founder of the Law Office of Neal S. Zaslavsky in West Hollywood, Calif., and can be reached at [neal@nszlegal.com](mailto:neal@nszlegal.com).

# Why I Remain a Trial Lawyer at Age 90

By || **PAUL D. RHEINGOLD**

**A**AJ's Annual Convention in Philadelphia last summer was the 61st that I've attended—with 60 that were consecutive until COVID intervened. It gave me an opportunity to reflect on my work with AAJ and on my career as a trial lawyer.

I'm dedicated to AAJ for two main reasons: First, it helped me hone my skills as a plaintiff lawyer, and second, I'm a former AAJ employee. Soon after graduating from law school, I worked from 1961–1963 for the organization we then knew as the National Association of Claimants' Compensation Attorneys (NACCA) as the assistant editor-in-chief of the NACCA Law Journal. Tom Lambert, who is still remembered today by older members, was editor-in-chief. Our office was in the former Watertown, Mass., home of Roscoe Pound, and we wrote both an annual volume and newsletters, in which there were squibs of major new decisions. While working for NACCA, I started a newsletter for developments in products liability, which over time grew into today's *Products Liability Law Reporter*.

My engagement with AAJ continued after I left the association to practice in New York. I served as the annual convention education program chair for two years, and I helped create Sections based on the type of tort practice our members were engaged in. At that time, workers' compensation, admiralty, and railroad were major areas of practice. That process continues today—with members working closely alongside

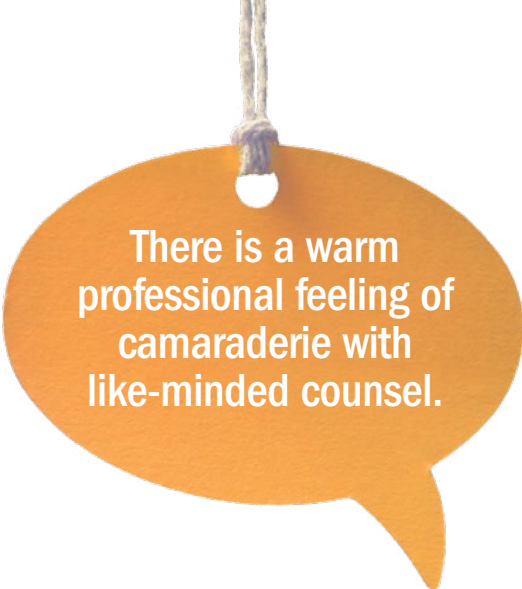
AAJ's Section & Litigation Group Coordination Committee to create new practice area-specific member groups as the fields of tort law evolve. I also once served as NACCA's national secretary.

My workload is lighter today than it was in the past and—courtesy of COVID—I moved my office to my home. But I'm still handling some cases, including a handful of professional negligence cases. Working with clients to hold wrongdoers accountable continues to motivate me.


I'm still involved in mass torts—my work in this area harkens back to 1966 with the MER/29 litigation. Since the lawyers involved in that drug litigation representing plaintiffs were all NACCA members, we met as a group during NACCA conventions to discuss progress. There was no multidistrict litigation back then. Our MER/29 group set a template for AAJ's Litigation Groups today.

Every trial lawyer knows there is great satisfaction in litigating cases in which you are helping injured people. But equally important is the feeling of professionalism and association with other lawyers. Some of the happiest times I can recall are being in a lawyers' waiting room in the early morning awaiting assignments to pick a jury or answer the calendar. There is a warm professional feeling of camaraderie with like-minded counsel.

It's important to keep current on developments in the law—both substance and procedure—and that is where AAJ has come in for me. In Philadelphia last summer, for example, I attended



Litigation Group presentations on the status of various ongoing litigation. I learned a lot from excellent young lawyers on handling medical negligence cases. Plus, *Trial* magazine and other AAJ resources help keep me informed.

Those of you who love the practice of law and continue to be trial lawyers beyond the normal age of retirement know that it can be as much a challenge as it is a pleasure. It may be harder to get to court. And you may have to write things down more often or ask people to repeat what they said. However, you are staying engaged in the practice of law and helping injured clients obtain justice. 

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# A Trial Lawyer Made by Payments Forward

By || KRISTEN L. BEIGHTOL

I have learned from my mentors to pay it forward and to shape the lawyers I want to work with in the future.

My career as a trial lawyer was a gift to me from the many mentors who have helped me along the way. I did not have a family member who was a lawyer or someone in my life guiding me along the legal path. But growing up, I was always troubled when some people were not afforded the same opportunities as others. I wanted to fight for these people, but I was shy by nature and not confident in my advocacy. I went to law school because I wanted a career where I could fight for fairness.

Enter the dean of my law school. I went to his office one day to discuss something, and we had a great conversation, which caused him to at least be able to pick me out of a crowd. One day, while walking through the halls, he pulled me aside and told me his friend from law school was hiring and encouraged me to apply. The position was for a medical malpractice lawyer at a technology-forward, large firm. I applied, got the job, and loved it.

That first boss assigned me two mentors: one litigator and one pre-litigation attorney. Both took their roles as mentors very seriously. The litigator had me shadow a few things and then threw me into the deep end to take depositions, handle hearings, and go to trial. I was good at the role, and I loved it.

My confidence grew—I felt that I could help the people I always wanted to help even though I didn't initially think I could be that person. But I did become that person—and I excelled. The pre-litigation attorney taught me the nuts and bolts. To this day, she will answer any question and has been a continued support throughout my career.


I then landed on the medical malpractice team at another large plaintiff firm. There, I found that my mentors also included my peers. I had grown in my career to the extent that I could confer with colleagues and, together, we would come up with the best ways to advocate for our clients.


I eventually decided to change things up and took a job on the other side of

the fence. I hated the job—but even that experience and the lawyers I met in the role shaped me as a litigator. It is a very important lesson to learn what you do like and what you don't like. That role taught me that, and the peers I met in that role, too, have become lifetime friends and colleagues. We call each other and connect on legal and life issues and are better for it.

I went back to my true love of plaintiff medical negligence litigation. I was soon tasked with trying a case alongside a famous trial lawyer. I was in the deep end again, and I loved it. And yet again, I gained a mentor. That mentor took my skills to a new level by pushing and challenging me.

And then it happened—I went out on my own with a partner. It was the best decision I ever made. The shy law student is now a successful medical malpractice litigator who loves her job and—having learned from her many mentors—can advocate for her clients while also being human to her adversaries.

I also learned from my mentors to pay it forward and to shape the lawyers I want to work with in the future. I mentor every year with my law school and county's mentorship program. And I always pick up the phone and meet with any law student or lawyer who reaches out. It matters. Pay it forward, and give someone a career they love. 

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At AAJ, we believe that greater **diversity** and **inclusion** in plaintiff law firms will enhance the **trial lawyer community**. We are committed to supporting diversity among AAJ's membership and its leadership.

The **Pledge to Act** is an initiative of the **Diversity and Inclusion Committee** to help firms fulfill their commitments to support the recruitment, retention, and promotion of minority attorneys.

Read more about AAJ Member Firm Pledge to Act: [www.justice.org/PledgeToAct](http://www.justice.org/PledgeToAct)

## SPOTLIGHT

The Gibbs Law Group LLP Diversity Fellowship builds upon AAJ's Pledge to Act by actively reaching underrepresented law students to show them a career path through weekly training sessions, hands-on mentorship, and meaningful case work with attorneys across various practice areas.

Learn more at [classlawgroup.com/careers/diversity-fellowship](http://classlawgroup.com/careers/diversity-fellowship)

