

Q&A > department

Timothy S. Tomasiak

Age: 44

Family: He and his wife, Jennifer, a former assistant state's attorney, have two children, McKenzie, 2, and Maeve, 7 months old.

Education: He graduated from the University of Colorado in 1986, and the University of Denver Sturm College of Law in 1989.

Professional: He was a Cook County assistant state's attorney for eight years, and joined Clifford Law Offices in 1998.



1. What is the last big case you worked on that you can discuss, and what did it entail?

The last really big case that I concluded was the Hancock litigation, which stemmed from the March 2002 collapse of the scaffolding at the Hancock Center ...

After a hundred or so depositions, and the case was very aggressively defended by very competent and formidable defense counsel, we discovered — after listening to hundreds of audiotape of construction progress meetings that were recorded — a meeting where the architect was doing the right thing and telling the owner and the contractor that they have to get the equipment off the building because it was dangerous. And the owner and contractor and others said they wouldn't take it down until they're done ...

Finally when expert discovery was concluded, Judge [Donald P.] O'Connell, who mediated the case, did great work on behalf of all the parties in bringing about a fair and reasonable resolution.

We were able to get a successful result for our clients, which I felt really great about because there were so many families, husbands, wives, mothers, and fathers who were left without loved ones, and other people who were seriously injured ...

2. What is the strangest thing that ever happened to you as a lawyer?

When I was a prosecutor I was trying an armed robbery case and we had the victim on the stand in front of the jury, who was an elderly neighborhood storeowner who had previously identified the defendant to the police within minutes of the crime.

When we asked the victim to look around the courtroom and identify the offender he slowly looked to his left, to his right, to the right, to the left, and up and down the jury box. He then got out of the witness stand and walked about six rows deep to the middle of general seating and identified a random citizen as the perpetrator.

We were still able to obtain a conviction because the defendant had proceeds from the robbery in his coat and in his car at the time of the arrest. But it was a reminder that sometimes truth is stranger than fiction.

3. If you could have lunch with anyone, living or dead, who would it be and why?

It would be easy to select a political, religious, scientific, or cultural leader, but it would be nice to have lunch with my little sister Megan, who died 10 years ago of leukemia. To have lunch and just say hello and know everything is okay, [someone] who always followed my career carefully and was a great source of inspiration. That personal loss has helped me to identify with my clients who have lost loved ones through catastrophic accidents or malpractice.

4. What is your favorite book, television show, or movie about lawyers, and why?

When I was in high school I went to the theater to see a movie where I really didn't know what to expect. The movie was "The Verdict" with Paul Newman, and I was absolutely enthralled with the movie.

What I appreciate about the movie then and appreciate about the movie now, is the story line is such that he's an attorney, his name is Frank Galvin, and he's down on his luck. His career has gone from the highest levels of the practice of law to almost the lowest. He is about as down and out as one can be, and he's referred a medical malpractice case that's a serious case.

His early selfish interest is to settle the case because there has been malpractice, there's

some corruption and some records-tampering. As he gets into the case, his heart, dedication, and ethical obligations take over and he works the case up ...

It was a very inspirational movie to see as a young kid because it did interest me and it gave me more interest in becoming a lawyer. The other thing I appreciate about that movie, maybe more now than I did then, is, I think people from whatever walks of life and from whatever profession, can reinvent themselves at any time — whether you are 18 or 30 or 60 years old — and that's what Paul Newman did in that movie ...

5. What advice do you have for new lawyers or those wanting to become lawyers?

I tell college students and young lawyers to make sure they are getting into the law for the right reasons, and make sure you are selecting the right career track within the law.

I think a lot of people might be drawn to the allure of being a lawyer or professional, or maybe they're drawn to the salaries that some lawyers may earn. That's not the right reason to become a lawyer. You have to truly enjoy this sort of work because it is, as we all know, challenging. It's hard work. It's not without its sacrifices.

So many times I've talked to lawyers at big firms and it's clear to me they would be happier, at least in their younger years, working for the public guardian, state's attorney's office, or public defender's office, and I think you have to follow your heart in that regard because you have to select something in the law that you truly enjoy.

6. What is your favorite childhood vacation?

My mother is Irish, and as a young child we went to Ireland several times as a family, which was great.

When I was about 14 years old I got to remain in Ireland and work on a farm for about a month with a family and it was just a great experience because as a young kid growing up in the Chicagoland area, and really only knowing the Chicagoland area, it was an opportunity to see another culture, to live with another culture, interact with people who were pretty much like we were but lived different lives. I think as a young person it helped open my eyes more to the world. ■

By Olivia Clarke