

Chicago Daily Law Bulletin®

Volume 159, No. 22

Kotin describes the late Corboy's life and legacy

BY MARY KATE MALONE
Law Bulletin staff writer

In the early years of Phillip H. Corboy's career, he tried a case in Cook County Circuit Court that helped illustrate the absurdity of an Illinois tort law in place at the time.

Corboy represented the owner of a race horse who wanted to recover damages after the horse died in a vehicle accident. The jury awarded the owner \$90,000.

In 1961, the cap in Illinois on wrongful death cases remained at \$30,000.

"You can imagine the soap box he got on after that," said Daniel M. Kotin, Corboy's nephew. "The outrage that you could collect \$90,000 for the death of a horse — but under Illinois law, \$30,000 was the most you could get for the death of a human being."

Corboy, who died on June 12, 2012, at age 87, helped invent the modern tort system during his half-century career practicing personal-injury law, said Kotin, a partner at Corboy & Demetrio P.C.

(In 1977, the state legislature repealed the \$30,000 wrongful death cap.)

Kotin discussed the impact of his uncle's life during a Tuesday event titled, "The Life and Legacy of Phil Corboy" at Loyola University Chicago School of Law.

"Those of you that knew Corboy are sitting there looking at me and saying to yourself, 'There's no way this guy can possibly describe the essence of Corboy to people that never met him.' You're right, I cannot," Kotin said.

But certain qualities of Corboy stood out, he said.

"Energy, I think, is the word that made Corboy who he was, and another intangible quality — instinct," Kotin said. "It seems throughout his life, he knew, by instinct, what needed to be done, how it needed to be done and



Mary A. Dempsey, the widow of Philip H. Corboy, spoke with Philip Harnett Corboy Jr. (left) and Daniel M. Kotin (right) at Loyola University Chicago School of Law Tuesday. Kotin, a partner at Corboy & Demetrio P.C., delivered a talk at the school about the late Corboy, who was his uncle. *Ralph Greenstade*

when it needed to be done."

Corboy showed this innate sense while working for the Chicago corporation counsel's office after graduating from Loyola law school in 1949, Kotin said. James Dooley, a first-generation, Irish Catholic trial lawyer, asked Corboy to come work for him.

"Talk about instinct — Corboy has this great job, job security, you could work (at the corporation counsel's office) your whole life and have a pension and retire, but he left that job to work for Dooley," Kotin said. "And after one month with Dooley, he tried his first jury case."

In two years, Corboy won about 10 jury verdicts and learned critical lessons from Dooley about the law and the importance of building relationships, Kotin said. In 1952, Corboy started his own firm with Dooley's blessing.

Corboy's most well-known cases involved his representation of the families of three local people who died from poisoned Tylenol capsules purchased in Chicago-area stores in 1982 as well as his legal work on behalf of

the families of victims killed in an American Airlines plane crash at O'Hare International Airport in 1979.

Much of his motivation in those cases stemmed from the death of his 12-year-old son, Robert, who got struck by a car while riding his bike in 1976, Kotin said.

Kotin displayed pictures of Corboy on two large screens, which included photos of him with the late U.S. Sen. Ted Kennedy, former President Bill Clinton and President Barack Obama.

"It's fair to say in the last 20 years of his life, he made a second career of protecting the rights of his clients and making sure Democrats remained in control in Springfield and Washington," Kotin said.

Corboy also trained countless young attorneys at the so-called "Corboy College of Law," he said. "The truth is, virtually every successful plaintiff lawyer in Chicago since 1952 has been somehow a decedent of Phil Corboy," he said.

Shawn S. Kasserman, a partner at Corboy & Demetrio,

met Corboy as he began his second year of law school at DePaul University College of Law in 1988.

Kasserman interviewed with Corboy for a clerk position for about an hour and realized "this guy is really something special."

Corboy offered him a position on the spot. Kasserman started working immediately, missing a planned dinner with his grandparents, he said.

His grandfather understood and told Kasserman, "You'll be set for life."

Corboy's proteges also could set off Corboy's temper at times, Kotin said.

"He would turn purple, scream and spit and call you names you've never heard," Kotin said. "And he would make up new swear words and make you feel this big ... And then you would fix it and you'd never do it again."

Mary A. Dempsey, Corboy's widow and president of the Philip H. Corboy Foundation, said she always knew when her husband became frustrated with a colleague's trial preparation.

"His signature phrase when you knew he was going to question someone very pointedly about their trial preparation was, 'Help me out,'" Dempsey said after Kotin's talk. "The minute I heard it, if I was in the house and he was on the phone ... I'd think, 'Uh-oh, somebody didn't do something.'"

Dempsey and Corboy married in 1992. "I was the luckiest person in the world to meet him, fall in love with him and marry him," Dempsey said.

Carrie Gilbert, a third-year law student at Loyola, said she attended Kotin's talk to learn more about the man whose name she hears frequently.

"What I took away, was that the law can really be a tool for change and you can really leave behind a legacy," Gilbert said. "The man is a legend here in a lot of ways."