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Jeffrey Kroll: Understanding the people he represents

By Ina Silvergleid

When personal-injury attorney Jeffrey J. Kroll decided to start his own law practice two years ago after working as an attorney for Clifford Law Offices for 17 years, there was a certain feeling of déjà vu about his decision.

While the path traveled by the 45-year-old Kroll, of The Law Offices of Jeffrey J. Kroll, has been followed by many an aspiring attorney fortunate enough to have been mentored at one of the elite personal-injury law firms in Chicago, there was nothing in Kroll's upbringing that

fated him to a career in the law.

Kroll did not come from a family of lawyers. He was the first person in his family to go to college. His father worked as a truck driver and his mother as a bank teller. And he readily admits that he was not one of those children who dreamed of becoming a lawyer. Rather, like many a young boy who got a thrill from standing in the batter's box, he wanted to play professional baseball.

"A lot of my heroes were sports-related, whether they were coaches or athletes," he said.

"When I was a kid, sports were my life."

One of Kroll's fondest childhood memories was meeting Ernie Banks, the Chicago Cubs' legendary hall of famer. Despite having lived about a mile and a half from the old Comiskey Park until age 12 — when his family moved to Orland Park — and having a father who was an ardent White Sox fan, Kroll admits to being a lifelong Cubs fan. Kroll attributes his allegiance to the North Side team to his having met Banks.

Although Kroll never realized his dream of

playing sports professionally, his years of playing team sports instilled in him a love of competition and helped him to dispel his fear of losing.

Kroll said he thinks he was attracted to the practice of law because of its competitiveness. He credits his success as a trial lawyer with being able to put losing into perspective.

“As a trial lawyer, the one thing that I learned early on through sports is that you can’t be afraid to lose,” he said. “You have to go at it. If you’re going to compete, you’re going to lose sometimes. If you’re afraid of losing, it’s very hard to be competitive.”

If it weren’t for sports, Kroll might not have attended college. His parents did not push him to go to college.

“They really wanted me to do something that made me happy,” he said.

Kroll went to college so he could play football. At 5’8” and 135 pounds, he knew he wasn’t likely to get the chance to play professionally. He started school at the University of Wisconsin-Whitewater, where he played wide receiver and was a member of the punt return team. Kroll is not shy about mentioning that he still ranks 10th in punt return averages.

In 1984, Kroll dropped out of college for a semester and briefly considered becoming a truck driver, like his dad and his grandfather before him. Kroll realized, however, that being a truck driver was not the kind of life he wanted when his dad was called into work one early, frigid winter morning to plow snow.

Kroll returned to college, completing his undergraduate degree at DePaul University, where he received a double major in finance and economics.

Kroll first began considering law school during his junior year at DePaul when he took a pre-law course that he enjoyed. Kroll enrolled at DePaul University College of Law in 1987.

A destiny

Although he initially considered becoming a corporate attorney, Kroll soon turned his sights on personal-injury law after taking torts during his first year. In retrospect, Kroll said he was “destined” to become a personal-injury lawyer and represent “the little guy against corporate America.”

He recalled how as a child he’d accompany his dad on the picket lines when the union would go on strike.

He also remembered how his parents lived from paycheck to paycheck during much of his youth.

As fate would have it, after his first semester of law school, Kroll needed to earn some money and got a job as a law clerk at Clifford Law Offices.

How did Kroll come to work for Robert A. Clifford?

It probably didn’t hurt that Kroll was related to Clifford by marriage and had known him since he was a child. However, that didn’t mean Kroll did not have to prove his worth.

Kroll said he believes Clifford placed the bar higher for him because of their familial relationship.

He devoted his time to law school classes and working for Clifford; everything else got put “on the back burner.”

As Clifford’s law clerk, Kroll helped write briefs and speeches for him, sat in court with him and, when needed, “grab[bed] McDonalds for him.”

Kroll readily admits that Clifford was his “most important legal mentor.” Kroll said he learned a lot from Clifford, “not just about trial strategy but just [about] life.”

Because Kroll knew early on that he wanted to be a personal-injury trial lawyer, he loaded up on trial practice courses, as well as courses covering medical malpractice and products liability law.

One class Kroll took was an introduction to health law seminar taught by Mary Dempsey, now commissioner for the Chicago Public Library. Back then, Dempsey taught part time at DePaul and was an attorney for Michael Reese Hospital.

Dempsey said Kroll was bright, prepared, very sharp, and very human, which she said are important qualities to have when representing clients who have been injured or who have lost a loved one.

When their paths crossed again several years later, Dempsey said she wasn’t surprised to learn that Kroll had become a personal-injury attorney. Likewise, she has not been surprised by his legal accomplishments.

Dempsey said Kroll “is one of the hardest and most diligent workers I’ve ever met.”

Kroll took to heart the lessons learned from Clifford, which are: 1) be more prepared than your opponent, and 2) know both the strengths and the weaknesses of your case.

Kroll possesses that “kind of intellectual curiosity and dogged competence, which doesn’t sound like a compliment but I truly mean it as a compliment,” Dempsey said.

He is an “extremely reasonable” individual, she said. He understands that representing a client well does not mean being “uncivil, unprincipled or unduly burdensome to your opponents.”

Dempsey said you want to represent your client “with great integrity,” as Kroll does.

Reasons for success

When asked why he believes he has been successful in the courtroom, Kroll points to his blue-collar roots, which he says gives him an understanding of “what drives people, what motivates people.”

Also, he said he is able to convey to jurors that he’s “one of them” and they can trust him.

When trying a case in Cook County, in particular, Kroll finds that his knowledge of Chicago, its neighborhoods, parks and parishes, and ethnic fabric gives him a “step up” when picking a jury.

But even when he’s trying a case elsewhere — be it in downstate Illinois or Texas — Kroll does not shy away from his Chicago roots.

His Chicago “accent” did not keep a Greenville, S.C. jury from returning a \$7 million verdict against a local doctor for his client, a 40-year-old man who died from colon cancer.

As long as “you have the facts and the evidence and you’re persuasive,” Kroll said, it doesn’t matter where you come from.

Kroll also points to the deep bonds he forms with his clients as a factor in his success. “I’m so invested in the clients and I mean that not just professionally because I care about those people.”

He said he would not have had this opportunity had he represented “corporate America.”

He said the greatest part of this job is the relationships that he’s made.

His clients agree with him.

One former client, Beth Hannon, invited Kroll to her son’s wedding and placed him at the head table. In addition to Hannon’s wedding, Kroll has been invited to nine other clients’ weddings.

In 2004, Kroll represented Hannon at a trial after her son, Brian, who was attending North-

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ern Illinois University in 2000, was killed by a fellow Evans Scholars student who hit him in the head with a cinder block thrown from a second-floor fire escape.

Hannon describes Kroll as “our friend,” adding: “I wish I could have met him under other circumstances.”

In 1996, Kroll won his first million-dollar verdict in a case he tried on behalf of Paula Solimini before a jury in Lake County, a place not known for large damage awards in personal-injury cases.

At that point, Kroll had been practicing law for six years and was 32 years old. Two years earlier, Solimini had been in a horrific head-on automobile collision in which she nearly lost her right leg.

Before the case went to trial, the defendant offered to settle for \$500,000. Kroll told Solimini he believed the case was worth more and recommended that she go to trial. The jury ended up awarding Solimini a \$2.45 million verdict, which at that time was the highest award for non-economic injuries returned by a Lake County jury.

Although it has been more than 10 years since Kroll tried her case, Solimini remains in contact with him and has referred two clients to him.

Asked to describe their attorney-client relationship, Solimini said it was like a “friend representing a friend.”

“I wasn’t treated like a number,” she said. “He got to know me as I was both before and after the accident.

“He treated me as if I was the only person he was representing.”

When Kroll was getting ready to leave Clifford’s office, he called Solimini to let her know of his decision, telling her, “I want to get back to the Paulas of the world.”

Asked what she thought he meant by that, Solimini said she took the statement to mean that Kroll wanted the opportunity to get to know his clients in the way he had gotten to know Solimini and her parents, with whom he had become very close.

For Kroll, Solimini’s case marked a crucial turning point for him.

Before trying the case, he questioned whether he had what it took to be a successful trial attorney.

“After I had that verdict in Lake County, it made me realize I can do this and do it well,” he

said. “That was a big deal for me.”

Nowadays, one of the litmus tests Kroll uses in deciding whether to represent someone is his willingness to take the case to trial, even though he knows that less than 5 percent of cases end up going to trial.

For those who have tried cases against Kroll, the thought that he ever questioned his capabilities as a trial attorney might come as a surprise.

In the late 1990s, Kroll tried a simple negligence case against Bernie Roccanova. Roccanova, who had been trying cases for 25 years, had seen his share of trial attorneys, and was notably impressed by what he saw.

“If I were to say one thing about Jeff I would say Jeff is a natural,” Roccanova said. “You’re not blown away by his intellect — as smart as he is — you’re blown away by his personality, because he’s a natural. He may not be the first one that I’ve seen that I would say, ‘Hey, that guy’s a natural in the courtroom,’ but he was the best at it. He was the best at relating to people.”

Describing Kroll’s presence in the courtroom, Roccanova said it’s as if he’s invited the jury over “to his house to tell them stories about his golf game.”

His style

When he first started trying cases, Kroll admitted that he tried to copy Clifford’s style, adopting his mannerisms, telling his stories.

After losing his first four trials, Kroll realized that impersonating his mentor was not going to be his ticket to success. He had to find his own voice and stories to tell, and be himself.

Nowadays, Kroll regularly peppers his closing arguments with stories about his young children, along with sports analogies.

For Kroll, being a trial attorney is less about being imperious and all-knowing and more about being a trusted guide or good storyteller.

If one were to compare a trial to a theatrical production, Kroll likens his role to that of a producer. He’s the person responsible for assembling the witnesses and determining what demonstrative evidence would best tell his client’s story.

Although Kroll’s skills in the courtroom have won him wide recognition and numerous accolades, there is no evidence of this in his office.

His office walls are bare.

When asked why he has not hung anything up, Kroll said he purposefully does not display “diplomas or anything along those lines” on his office walls.

His office is scattered with color photographs of his family. “I’m a family person and I want [my clients] to know that family is important to me,” he said.

In 2000, Kroll married attorney Ginger Mayer, who he met through Roccanova.

While Roccanova claims it was not his intention to play “matchmaker” when he suggested that Mayer — who had spent much of her legal career defending railroad companies but was thinking about becoming a plaintiff’s attorney — talk to Kroll about being a plaintiff’s attorney, he does admit he had a “secondary thought” that the two might like one another.

Today, Kroll and his wife have two children, Jack and Lily, ages 7 and 1.

A new start

After several years of mulling over the idea, in 2007 Kroll decided to set up his own practice. Kroll said he knew that if “I didn’t do it now I would never do it.”

Beforehand, Kroll sought advice from Clifford and personal-injury attorney Terry Lavin, who had space in his office to rent. The arrangement enabled Kroll to keep his initial overhead costs low.

When he left Clifford’s firm, Kroll took about 45 cases with him. At first, Kroll said he thought he’d be a solo practitioner, but soon realized that he was going to need some help. Three weeks later, Kroll hired Heather Begley, a former associate at Clifford’s firm who had left to be a stay-at-home mom.

Kroll said he’s encountered few hurdles since going out on his own. The ones he has encountered have been of a personal nature. Eight months after starting his firm his father died after a brief illness. Shortly after, his mother was diagnosed with throat cancer.

“You can’t just put the office on the back burner and deal with life,” he said. “That for me was one of the toughest things [I had] to do.”

One of the primary reasons Kroll left Clifford’s office was to spend more time with his family. Kroll’s son was just starting kindergarten and was at that age where he could

participate in organized sports.

Like his father, Kroll wanted to be his son's coach. Today, Kroll said he gets as much satisfaction out of being called "coach" as being called "counselor."

Kroll's work-life balance philosophy extends to his legal staff, which now consists of two associates, a paralegal and a law clerk.

Begley said Kroll made her decision to return to practicing law easy. During their initial discussion, Kroll told Begley: "I want us to have a life. I want us to work hard but I also want us to have a life."

Kroll made good on his offer. Begley works in the office three days and from home the other two days.

"This was the kind of flexibility I was looking for," she said, now a mother of two. Begley doubts that she would have accepted Kroll's job offer without it.

Another reason why Kroll put up his own shingle was so that he could again work in a

small-firm setting.

"When I left [Clifford Law Offices] I wanted to build on not only what I learned over those 17 years, but also to recapture for me this small family dynamic in running the firm," he said.

When Kroll first started working at Clifford's firm there were only about a half-dozen attorneys. By the time he left the firm had quadrupled in size.

Kroll also wanted to get to know his clients and their families as he used to, visiting with them at their kitchen tables, often over a cup of coffee.

Now, he said, "I know all the clients I have. I know what everyone is doing and I just don't want to get to a spot in my life or my career when I don't have my finger on the pulse — I don't know what's going on."

Kroll has had no trouble attracting new clients. Of his current caseload, half of the firm's cases were generated through personal

referrals and the other half through Kroll's marketing efforts, which include his website, giving speeches and publishing articles.

Kroll utilizes such social media networking tools as blogs and Twitter, and says these tools significantly increase traffic at his website.

Although he concedes he's not part of the "Twitter generation," Kroll said once he understood the marketing value of these tools, he "wanted to get ahead of the curve, instead of be[ing] a Johnny come lately."

The firm now blogs daily and, according to Kroll, has a following.

While he said he believes most firms will be blogging within the next two years, Kroll does not believe these new tools will replace the public recognition gained from trying cases and getting positive results.

"Anybody can blog. Anybody can have a website," he said. "Not everybody has results." ■

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