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# BOB CLIFFORD

## Putting No Limits on Patience, Compassion, and Understanding

by Adam W. Lasker

How does a kid from a blue-collar family on Chicago's South Side end up becoming one of the nation's top trial attorneys?

"Dumb luck, good circumstances, hard work, and persistence," says Robert A. Clifford, 58, who grew up "in a neighborhood full of cops, firemen and small-time politicians" but who now has a track record of obtaining multi-million-dollar jury verdicts and settlements in high-profile lawsuits.

Clifford has been named several times over as one of the most successful personal-injury attorneys in the country; his Chicago-based law firm, **Clifford Law Offices**, has topped the charts in multiple Illinois settlement surveys; and his resume includes a list of community service so extensive that even Santa Claus doesn't have time to check it twice.

"I'm the only guy from my neighborhood who went to college, let alone law school, so it easily could have been otherwise," Clifford says of his professional accomplishments. "The fact of the matter is that I've had a lot of opportunities presented to me simply by, I suppose, being in the right place at the right time and having the wherewithal to identify the opportunities and to take advantage of those situations."

As a plaintiff's attorney, many opportunities that have presented themselves to Clifford have involved some particularly disastrous situations.

To name just a few: When a commuter rail company closed the doors of a train on the bags of an internationally acclaimed musician and then dragged her along the tracks for almost 300 feet, Clifford secured a \$30 million jury verdict on behalf of the violinist, Rachel Barton; when scaffolding collapsed and fell from the upper floors of Chicago's John Hancock Building, Clifford obtained a \$75 million settlement for the victims; and when each and every major commercial airline crash has happened within the past 20 years, Clifford has been there to seize the opportunities and to serve as attorney for victims and their families.

But as a human being, Clifford believes he is not someone who merely capitalizes off someone else's misery. He says his role as a plaintiff's attorney brings him intimately close to families when they are in great emotional, if not physical, pain, and he strives to be patient, compassionate, and understanding with all of his clients.

"I had to tell that just the other day to a

senior lawyer in my office who's handling a client who can be rather difficult and who is giving him a hard time," Clifford says. "But the client was horribly injured in circumstances that never should have occurred—we're not walking in that client's shoes, so we have to have no limit to our patience, compassion, and understanding."

In his first years as an attorney, "tort reform and the demonization of lawyers" was just starting to become a hot-button issue that would eventually tarnish the reputation of plaintiff's lawyers everywhere. Clifford also blames some members of the plaintiff's bar—who he refers to as "hustlers"—for undermining the profession by focusing too much on dollar amounts and feeble claims but not enough on the tragedies that have occurred in their clients' lives.

He is, perhaps, just as much of a family counselor as he is a litigator.

"There are a lot of hustlers out there, and I'll speak negatively about them, but I won't apologize for representing the people I do," says Clifford. "I'm one of the first people a family calls when something goes wrong, and I'm very proud of that. I'm proud of what I do, and I do it with hard work and integrity."

### The Making of an All-Star Attorney

Clifford's climb to greatness in the legal field started at DePaul University College of Law, where he earned his juris doctor degree in 1976, three years after receiving a bachelor of science degree from DePaul's College of Commerce.

Law school in downtown Chicago during the mid '70s was "the right place at the right time" for Clifford, and opportunities started presenting themselves in the form of people who were willing to take a chance on him and share with him their experiences and expertise.

First there was the late Richard Groll, who was then dean of the DePaul law school and who Clifford credits as being one of the first lawyers who started opening doors for him in the legal community. "He took a liking to me and was very encouraging to me while I was in law school," Clifford says.

Then there was the day a guest lecturer visited one of Clifford's classes and "wowed" the young law student with his detailed stories about client counseling and complex litigation. After class, Clifford asked his law professor:

"How do you get a job with a guy like that?"

"You don't," the professor responded.

Undeterred, the student called the guest lecturer's law office and told his secretary that he had just one follow-up question to ask. The secretary put through his call, and Clifford asked his one question: "How do I get a job with a guy like you?"

Well, as dumb luck would have it, Clifford was hired as a law clerk by the guest lecturer, Philip H. Corboy, a founding partner of Corboy & Demetrio who has been practicing law for more than a half century now and who has won so many lawsuits that the city of Chicago named a street after him right outside the courthouse.

Clifford went on to work as an associate attorney at Corboy & Demetrio, where he says he took advantage of every situation that afforded him an opportunity to work with and be mentored by his senior partners.

"I learned my craft at the hands of a master, and I never take that for granted," Clifford says.

One of the first and most important things Clifford learned at "Corboy College" was to share his knowledge and experience with other attorneys, so that all clients everywhere will receive better legal services. This is but one of the many lessons that Clifford tries to instill in the atmosphere of his own Clifford Law Offices, which he opened in 1984.

"I believe in mentoring, number one," Clifford says. "The people who work for me really are working for clients of mine because I can't make a commitment to handle every case, but I do take great pride in knowing that my lawyers are giving the same amount of time, preparation, and skill to the clients that I would."

Terrence J. Lavin, a personal-injury and wrongful-death attorney who runs the Chicago-based Lavin Law Offices, P.C., 10 S. LaSalle St., was one of the first attorneys to learn from Clifford the true value of mentoring. This happened back when Lavin was a law student and vying for a clerking job at Corboy & Demetrio.

Clifford, who had been an attorney at the firm for about four years, conducted the interview, which Lavin says lasted about 10 or 15 minutes before he offered Lavin the job right on the spot.

"I felt touched by some kind of higher power—me being just a kid from the South Side with a guy like Bob Clifford asking me to come on board," Lavin says. "He basically told



me, ‘You can work for me, but the guy’s attention you really want to get is that white-haired guy [Corboy] walking down the hall—keep asking him for assignments.’”

Lavin did end up chasing that “white-haired guy” down the hall, and he learned a great deal under Corboy’s mentorship. But Lavin was also impressed with Clifford’s generosity, professionalism, and legal skills ever since that first interview.

Their professional relationship has grown into a personal friendship, but Lavin still considers Clifford to be a mentor who taught him many lessons of his own. Some lessons, Lavin says, remain a life-long challenge, like the importance of using technology to better represent a client in this modern day and age.

“For all I know, he’s probably Tweeting about something right now,” Lavin says. “He’s one of those annoying people who can keep up with all the technological trends just as much as he does with changes in the law.”

Other lessons, Lavin says, were less tangible, like trying to emulate the “instant maturity and credibility” that Clifford gained as a young attorney and the “energetic enthusiasm” that still allows Clifford to relate effectively with younger jurors.

“Now that he’s been around [the legal community] for 30 years, he still has a youthfulness about him, a real vigor in how he works as a lawyer,” Lavin says. “It’s an amazing feat to pull off to have instant credibility without looking like a neophyte,

when you are one, and then not looking like a guy who’s been around the block a few times, even though you have been.”

And some lessons, Lavin says, were so profound that the underlying stories remain vivid memories from his early days of assisting his mentors with high-profile cases.

One such memory comes from when Clifford was representing Barton, the violinist, in the jury trial against the rail company, which Lavin says was “arguably the most celebrated case Bob had ever tried.” Opposing counsel was a veteran defense attorney named C. Barry Montgomery, who Lavin says was known for using “pet sayings” and “stock arguments” in his opening and closing statements to the jurors and who was a friend of Clifford’s.

Perhaps Clifford wanted to teach Lavin the value of trial preparation or to teach Montgomery a lesson about using canned arguments. Whatever the purpose, Clifford set off on a somewhat unusual legal research project, Lavin recalls.

“When Clifford was getting ready for trial, he went and got transcripts of every single opening and closing statement Montgomery had ever done. It was not delegated—Bob read every single one of them, probably 100 or more transcripts,” Lavin says. “He cataloged all of Montgomery’s pet sayings, his stock arguments, and then in his opening argument, Clifford used all of them. He stole them all.”

Lavin says he watched Montgomery “twisting in his chair” and “scrapping arguments in his

mind” as Clifford used one pet saying after another in his presentation to the jurors.

Montgomery, a name partner at Chicago-based Williams, Montgomery & John, recalls sitting in the courtroom during the Barton trial “thinking I was listening to a playback of me talking. I have to compliment Bob: He did an excellent job on that, and probably much of his success had to do with pirating my comments that I give to a jury in opening and closing arguments with respect to their duties as a juror.”

When the jury announced the \$30 million verdict for Barton after a month-long trial, Lavin says that he, Clifford and a few others went to a nearby bar for celebratory drinks. A short while later, Montgomery walked into the bar, approached Lavin and said: “I want to hire you to represent me in a lawsuit, because I want to sue Bob Clifford for theft of intellectual property!”

The moral of that story, according to Lavin, is that Clifford uses a level of trial preparation in which “he never leaves a stone unturned. That’s priceless stuff, and he does it all the time.”

Montgomery, however, has never shied away from opposing Clifford in or out of the courtroom, despite the end result of the Barton case. “Most of the money that Bob received as a fee for that Rachel Barton case, I’ve gotten back from him on the golf course,” Montgomery says.

Clifford believes that preparation is fundamental for trial attorneys, and so he makes no apologies for, yet again, “having the

wherewithal to identify the opportunities and to take advantage of those situations.”

Clifford says that when he is in the courtroom, “preparation is critical, and I’m never underprepared. Perhaps I’m over-prepared, but I’ve been taught by Phil [Corboy] and others not to take it for granted, and so I don’t.”

### Writing the Handbook for Great Lawyers

As if trial preparation, litigation, client counseling, law-firm management, and mentoring weren’t enough, Clifford’s experiences, skills, and contributions to the community extend far beyond the practice of law, Lavin says.

“Bob Clifford’s resume is a handbook for anyone who wants to be a great lawyer, a great community leader or a great educator,” Lavin says.

Clifford has served as an adjunct professor at Chicago-Kent College of Law, The John Marshall Law School, Loyola University-Chicago School of Law, University of Chicago College of Law and, of course, at his alma mater, DePaul, for which he has also endowed the Tort Law and Social Policy Chair.

He has served on the educational faculties

every charitable campaign... It’s just part of being Bob.”

Clifford is past president of the Illinois Trial Lawyers Association and the Chicago Inns of Court. He is a member of the American College of Trial Lawyers, the International Academy of Trial Lawyers, the National Judicial College and the Rand Institute for Civil Justice, to name a few. And he is currently the second-vice president of the Chicago Bar Association, in line to serve as president in 2011-2012.

In 2005, Clifford was elected as the Illinois representative to the American Bar Association’s House of Delegates, a position he still holds today. He chaired the ABA Section of Litigation, which has more than 70,000 members, from 2001-2002, and in the wake of the September 11 terrorist attacks in 2001, the ABA president appointed Clifford to serve on the association’s Task Force on Terrorism and the Law.

Clifford says he was recently considering making a run for the presidency of the ABA, but he has decided not to seek that office due to the impact it would have on his family and professional life.

His wife of 36 years, Joan, is “as supportive as a wife could be...she puts up with me, and



Clifford speaks to the American Bar Association House of Delegates during its annual meeting in Chicago in 2009. He is serving his second term as the Illinois State Delegate to the ABA House of Delegates.

for about 350 days during his two-year term.

“My wife and I, we give back a lot—we support more associations and charities than I care to mention,” Clifford says. “But sometimes it gets out of control and feels like we’re doing too much, and we have to back off a little bit.”

Election to the top leadership position at the nation’s largest bar association could also take Clifford away from his law firm and out of the active practice of law, which is something he is not yet ready to give up.

“I could put together a race for ABA president and who knows what could happen—maybe I’d be lucky and privileged enough to get the nod from the Nominating Committee,” Clifford says. “But I’ve decided not to do that simply because the commitment is so great, and it’s something you’d have to do with a willing spouse. While I have the most supportive spouse in the world, who would do anything for me, I know that neither of us want me to give up our current lives and my law practice. I still love what I do in the practice of law, and I don’t see how my practice could survive. If I tried to continue working, that would mean I wasn’t 100 percent committed to the ABA, and if you can’t make that level of commitment, then you don’t deserve the office.”

Nonetheless, Clifford says he is looking forward to assuming the CBA presidency in 2011.

“I am very excited about that,” Clifford says. “It’s all part of the belief I have that you stay engaged, you remain active and you network, because we all have to learn from each other.”

CBA Executive Director Terrence Murphy is also excited to have Clifford come back “home” to the local bar, where he already has a history of contributing his time and efforts. Clifford served on the CBA Board of Managers back in the early ‘90s and has apparently left an indelible mark on the organization.



Clifford and Kevin P. Durkin, partner at Clifford Law Offices, examine a model of an airplane that crashed in Roselawn, Ind., on Oct. 31, 1994.

of countless bar associations and continuing-legal-education organizations, and he has taught courses at the University of Wisconsin School of Engineering and at William Rainey Harper College.

Clifford also maintains a level of active participation with local, state, and national bar associations that can be compared with few others.

“He is, without question, the most fully rounded lawyer and community guy you’ll find in the city of Chicago,” Lavin says. “He’s been the president of everything you’d want to be president of, he’s given every kind of speech you’d want to give, he’s taken on every kind of case, he’s fought every political battle, he’s led

that’s not easy.” He also says his daughters have been supportive of his career, although now that they’re grown, professional women, they might be too busy to notice whether he was ABA president. His older daughter, Erin, gave up teaching high school “in a combat zone in Chicago,” Clifford says, and is now a second-year law student at DePaul. His younger daughter, Tracy, owns a fashion business and travels the world as a buyer.

Nonetheless, the almost-constant travel that comes with the job as ABA president is something that neither Clifford nor his wife wants to endure. He says the ABA’s immediate past-president, H. Thomas Wells, is a close friend who told Clifford that he was away from home

"Bob puts his heart and his soul into his support for what the organized bar does on a national and a local level," Murphy says. "He has never lost sight of the CBA, and in a very real sense, Bob is coming home—and we're happy to welcome him home."

#### All the News That's Fit to Print

Clifford's long list of high-profile jury verdicts, tireless work with the bar associations, and philanthropic endeavors have not gone unnoticed in local and national media outlets, which have named him everything from "most-feared attorney" to "best of the bad" to "most likeable tough guy."

In 2003, the *National Law Journal* named the Clifford Law Offices one of the top 25 plaintiffs' firms in the country; a year later, the same publication named Clifford one of the nation's top 20 plaintiffs' attorneys. Also in 2004, Clifford was named one of the country's "five most respected and feared plaintiffs' attorneys" by the *Corporate Legal Times*. And Clifford's law firm topped the charts in *Chicago Lawyer Magazine's* annual settlement surveys of Illinois law firms in 2002 and 2005.

While many attorneys actively seek this kind of publicity and fame, Clifford insists that his primary focus has always been his law practice and his clients. The celebrity happened only as a natural byproduct of working hard at his craft, he says.

"One of the epiphanies I had as a young lawyer that made a true difference in my life was when I realized that what I do is not about me," Clifford says. "If you as a lawyer recognize that what you're doing is not about trying to build your own portfolio or to create wealth or a successful track record, and you just let those things come about naturally, then you will be using the good work that you do on behalf of someone else, and that will make you a better lawyer and a better person."

Thomas A. Demetrio, a founding partner of Corboy & Demetrio, says that Clifford has been proving himself as a talented lawyer since his first days at the firm. Clifford's penchant for garnering media attention, Demetrio says, is just another lesson he learned in his early years in the practice.

"Bob was tenacious, just tenacious, in everything that he did. His zeal to succeed was off the charts," Demetrio says. "He learned and absorbed everything Corboy had to offer, including the talent of getting publicity—Bob has even out-Corboyed Corboy in that regard."

Clifford remains a passionate attorney, a zealous advocate, and a trustworthy friend, Demetrio says.

"He believes in two things: one, continuing legal education so he can supply to others what he's acquired over the years, and two,

his love of people," Demetrio says. "His largesse, if it were a well, would be bottomless. He is the most loyal, caring, giving friend anyone could hope to have."

As might be expected from friendships among people who can be described as "most likeable tough guys," there does seem to be a bit of a rivalry among these attorneys. They have nothing but words of respect about each other professionally, but that all changes once the courtroom lights are turned off and the workday is done.

"Sometimes lawyers leave on good terms, sometimes not," Demetrio says of Clifford's departure from Corboy & Demetrio to open his own practice. "Bob left on great terms and we gave him a bunch of cases to get him going, and the rest is history."

But it's a different story when Clifford returns to Chicago from his vacation home in Naples, Florida, bragging to his friends

to be true, but is something that Clifford would never admit.

"He gets weird injuries so that he can't play golf," Lavin explains. "I think it's just so that he can have more hours preparing cases and shagging more business."

Clifford says that much of his time is currently consumed by representing plaintiffs in litigation involving the September 11 terrorist



An artist's sketch shows Clifford and violinist Rachel Barton, right, during a month-long trial in Cook County Circuit Court in 1999. Barton was injured when the doors of a commuter train closed on her bags, dragging her along the tracks for almost 300 feet; Clifford secured a \$30 million jury verdict on her behalf.



Clifford joins his wife, Joan, and Dan Schmidt, president and CEO of WTTW-Channel 11, Chicago's public television station. Clifford Law Offices has been a long-standing sponsor of closed captioning of all locally produced shows on the station.

about the \$70 million he helped raise during a Winter Wine Festival charity event benefiting the Naples Children and Education Foundation, for which Clifford serves on the board of trustees.

"He thinks he's a connoisseur of fine wine," Demetrio says. "But his self-proclaimed expertise in selecting wine is limited to going down the right-hand side of the wine list, finding the largest number, and ordering that bottle. That's his expertise."

According to Lavin, who has spent at least a few rounds golf on the course with Clifford, his friend's "main deficit in life" is something that most of his friends and colleagues know

attacks. Clifford is the liaison counsel among numerous attorneys in the case, which he says requires frequent trips to New York City.

"We go to court [in New York] and there are 100 lawyers in there, and me and two other guys do all the talking," Clifford says. "It's been a fascinating experience; it has a life of its own."

Is out-of-state litigation really enough to keep this personal-injury attorney off the golf course?

"Well, I injured myself in February when I fell and did the splits and tore two glute muscles almost off the bone, so I haven't been able to golf," Clifford says.

At least he still has his dumb luck, his good circumstances, and his remarkable career to keep him busy.

"Sometimes, just through pure luck, you fall into your life's work and it just fits you," Clifford says. "When I go to court, I don't get nervous, I get comfortable, relaxed—it just feels like home. I know lots of guys at the age of 58 who don't like their work or what they do, so I consider myself lucky to still be working so hard at something I enjoy so much." ■