To understand a little more about Bob Clifford, a good place to start comes at the end of one of his earliest high-stakes cases.

In 1995, Clifford represented Rachel Barton, a violin prodigy who lost her left leg and almost the other after her violin case got caught in the closing doors of a Metra train as it left the station.

The lawsuit went to trial and Clifford's standard closing argument involves an allusion to a sign he read at a rope factory near his childhood home in "Mudville," a South Side neighborhood that earned that name for being the last place in the city with paved streets.

“They had a sign above the employee entrance that said, ‘He who weaves this rope weaves his conscience into every rope line because so many lives depend thereon,’” he said.

“So I will tell a jury that when you go into that jury room and decide, your conscience is going to be woven into this verdict. So get it right — and for the right reasons.”

But Clifford said he strayed from those words in the Barton case. He chose instead to mimic his opposing counsel. He read dozens of closing arguments from this opponent and used almost all of that lawyer's go-to phrases.

C. Barry Montgomery, a founding partner of Williams Montgomery & John, the lawyer whose lines Clifford borrowed, recalled one of them: "Truth is foursquare. Any way you look at it, any angle you look at it, it always comes out the same. It's the truth."

Both messages speak to something Clifford said he believes about jurors: They want to do the right thing and the legal system needs them to do the right thing.

Swiping Montgomery's closing lines showed something others said they believe about Clifford: He found success through a healthy combination of his own personal creativity and a willingness to learn from others.

“He has taken the best of all the people around him and adapted that to his own style,” Montgomery said. "I'm talking about in all respects. Not just in the courtroom, but in terms of the way he dresses, the way he talks, the friends that he has and his relationships to other people. Bob is a self-made guy."

His compact frame, strong handshake and speech riddled with "you bettas" and "don't cha thinks" may mistake him for an employee at the Mudville lumberyard where he worked for 10 years as a young man.

But his success allows him to refer to people like President Barack Obama as a friend and to enjoy hobbies like wine collecting and playing golf.

The 61-year-old Clifford said he paid attention and took in the good parts of that lumberyard job and the habits of other lawyers.

"I try to be like a sponge in many respects," he said.

But much of his success came from his own creativity.

Using some lines from previous Montgomery closings, for instance, led to a $29 million verdict for Barton, a "dirty look" from Montgomery and validation for his own career.

In letters nominating Clifford as Chicago Lawyer's 2012 Person of the Year, judges, lawyers and family members noted his legal career as only a portion of their reasons for his nomination.

U.S. District Judge James F. Holderman and others said in letters that they nominated Clifford for his multifaceted service to the profession, his commitment to charity and his dedication to his two daughters, Erin and Tracy, and his wife of almost 40 years, Joan.

“He's got that extra magic as a trial lawyer, but he doesn't end there and that's what's so amazing about him in my opinion," Holder-
man said. “He has endless energy to improve the profession and endless energy to provide the financial support to charities where he sees that it’s needed.”

This year alone, Clifford represented clients in a $180 million verdict, served as president of The Chicago Bar Association and, along with his wife, chaired a fundraiser that generated about $12 million for low-income children in South Florida.

“Success is more than just the last case that you won,” Clifford said. “Giving back is part of the life that I’ve been lucky enough to live. And that includes 19 years of Catholic school, so I’m sure there’s some Catholic guilt in there also.”

From Mudville to ‘Corboy College’

The son of a carpenter and a housewife, Clifford grew up on the South Side, in a German-Irish home. His 19 years at Catholic schools included his attendance at Marist High School, DePaul University and DePaul University College of Law.

For a decade, from age 13 to 23, he worked in the only other job outside of the law as a lumberyard employee at Courtesy Home Center — a precursor to today’s Home Depot or Lowe’s — at 95th Street and Stony Island Avenue.

“It was a neighborhood filled with cops, firemen (and) blue-collar workers and all of them would encourage young people to get out, move on,” he said. “So I took that (advice).”

Instead of staying in Mudville, he went to college at DePaul University to earn an undergraduate degree in commerce. His student adviser at Marist suggested DePaul as the only Catholic school worth attending.

Not knowing anyone in his family or neighborhood with a college degree to emulate, law school attracted him as a way to use his “strong verbal skill set,” he said.

“I’ve always had that, no matter what,” he said. “I was the youngest graduate of the Dale Carnegie sales program at the age of 16. That taught me how to be more structured in how to sell the two-by-fours I was selling at the time. Now I just sell cases. How about that?”

His work selling cases started after a chance encounter with one of Chicago’s legends of the business, Phil Corboy.

While working at the lumberyard and in law school at DePaul, Clifford said he “was smitten” with the tall, blue-eyed trial lawyer who spoke to his civil procedure class.

“I went up to my professor after class and I said, ‘How do I get a job with a guy like that?’” Clifford said. “And he said, ‘He doesn’t hire people from DePaul. He’s a Loyola man and he
hires the best of the best.”

Unsatisfied with his professor’s answer, Clifford decided to ask Corboy the question himself. He found the address to Corboy’s office in the Yellow Pages inside DePaul’s phone booths and the receptionist let him into Corboy’s office when he got there.

“I said, ‘I was just at your class and I want to know, how do I get a job with a guy like you?’” Clifford said.

“And his response was, ‘Well if you have courage enough ... to come in and ask me that question, I’m going to check with your dean. And if your dean knows you and signs off on you, I’ll give you that job.’ And I’ve never worked for anyone else other than myself after that.”

Patricia C. Bobb, owner of Patricia C. Bobb & Associates, worked with Clifford as a member of “Corboy College,” a group of young lawyers at Corboy & Associates during the late 1970s and 1980s who later went on to prestigious legal careers.

As members of a group that spent long nights and weekends working together, Bobb said she refers to Clifford by his initials, “RAC.” He refers to her as “PCB.”

“You didn’t get a diploma, you got initials,” Bobb said. “It’s kind of a code for those of us who weathered that time with Corboy. He was a very tough boss and the longer you got away from it, the more you recognized it was necessary.”

“(Corboy) was not afraid to let lawyers not only do things on their own but take a chance that they wouldn’t fail,” Clifford said. “When you worked on a case that he was going to try, you knew the kind of preparation that he expected. And you would bring that to your own cases. ... Osmosis works.”

Bobb said she remembers Clifford carrying Corboy’s podium to the courthouse as a law clerk. She said he learned “all the best attributes of Phil,” including how to try cases and the need to get involved in bar associations and mentor young lawyers.

“Another thing that a lot of us learned watching Corboy is that you need to have some balance in your life. And I think Bob understands that,” Bobb said.

“He’s not so hyperfocused everyday on the practice that it sort of skewes him. He’s always thinking about doing something good for the profession and he seems to have achieved a kind of balance that a lot of trial lawyers don’t.”

A combination all his own

While Clifford said Corboy taught him the importance of preparation as a trial lawyer, other lawyers said Clifford developed a courtroom style that very much became his own.

He left Corboy’s practice in 1984, after 10 years, to start Clifford Law Offices.

Ten years later, he merged his practice back with Corboy & Demetrio, creating Corboy, Demetrio & Clifford. That firm lasted about a year before the group decided that despite the combined firm’s size and clout, it did not help business.

“Phil was a very aggressive, combative opponent in the courtroom,” said Montgomery of Williams Montgomery & John. “Bob is everyone’s friend, including all the jurors, the bailiff, the judge, the lawyers ... He does everything but sit in the juror’s box with the jury and sing ‘Kumbaya.’”

Montgomery said he and Clifford became good friends despite Clifford stealing his lines in the Barton case.

He considers Clifford a golfing partner (Clifford uses a set of TaylorMade clubs he won in a bet with Montgomery) and a bad dresser.

“He still wears a little more gold than I think he should,” Montgomery said. “And I tell him he should only wear blue or black suits, but he says brown is better.”

Dan Boho, a partner at Hinshaw & Culbertson who often opposes Clifford on matters, said Clifford’s down-to-earth, folksy attitude endears him with Cook County juries.

“He uses terms like ‘You betcha,’” Boho said. “I told him that I thought those two words got retired and are sitting at a retirement home down in Florida, but I see you still use them. But he likes that. He uses the old-time phrases that he would have heard still as a kid. ... There’s a part of him that thinks this is pretty darn cool for a kid growing up the way he did and I think that’s very real.”

One side of Clifford’s courtroom style includes wearing a brown suit to every closing argument — he wore one for his first big case and it led to a favorable settlement. Apart from his fashion sense, he said his courtroom persona can also include moments of anger — the no-nonsense side of one description Clifford cites in his law firm bio, “Chicago’s most likeable tough guy.”

For instance, he said he remembers a time when “there was blood all over the courtroom”...
said. “He writes me a six-figure check every year to support the symposium and he doesn’t even ask me what the people are going to say.”

Sometimes, the symposium runs counter to Clifford’s interests, Landsman said. Take the 10th symposium’s title: “Starting Over?: Redesigning the Medical Malpractice System,” which suggests a change to a system that helped Clifford build his practice.

“He doesn’t ever question if it’s to his benefit,” Landsman said. “It’s not about Bob. It’s about the work of people that are serious about the quality and future of the civil justice system.”

Terrence Murphy, the executive director of The Chicago Bar Association, said he learned about Clifford’s passion for educating the public on the role of the judiciary during his 2011-2012 term as CBA president.

“Bob takes on these fights and some of them are not easy. As a matter of fact, most of them are not easy,” Murphy said. “But he says what he feels. I think you’ll find a lot of people can be guarded in their personal life, in their comments and in the way they interrelate to other people. But one thing about Bob is he truly is his own person.”

Cook County Circuit Judge E. Kenneth Wright Jr. said Clifford impressed him with his willingness to support Wright’s term as CBA president in 2008-2009.

Wright’s theme as CBA president was “The Year of Lincoln” and he wanted Clifford’s help arranging support from the Lincoln museum in Springfield.

Within three minutes, Wright asked Clifford for help, he agreed and the meeting ended.

“I was impressed because I didn’t know him that well at that time and I didn’t know what to expect,” Wright said. “I was thrilled, but I didn’t know how to leave it. And he kind of showed you how to do it.

“He just says, ‘Gentleman, excuse me but I have to go to my next meeting.’ That’s how you do it. You don’t waste time with him. If you want him to do something, you lay it out thoroughly and he leaves.”

Clifford said he defines success as “the continued acquisition of worthy goals.”

But giving away his time or money does not rank as one of those goals.

“I don’t have it as a goal to give my time, talent or treasure away,” he said.
“I feel it’s my obligation to take some amount of each of those and devote them to other people.”

**Enjoying his life and helping others**

While Clifford said, “I love what I do for a living,” he also said his family proves the most important aspect of his life.

He met his wife Joan at a mixer thrown between his DePaul fraternity, Tau Kappa Epsilon, which he was president of at the time, and Joan’s sorority, Rho Delta Pi. Mixers, which are intended for fraternity and sorority members to meet, don’t involve dates.

“I made the faux pas of bringing a date to the mixer, which didn’t go over so well,” Clifford said.

“That was OK by me until I met my wife. And I sent the date home … saying ‘I made a mistake, this isn’t the date night.’ And then I ended up taking my wife home and I never dated anyone after that.”

The couple married July 29, 1973. In a letter nominating her husband for the honor of Person of the Year, Joan said clients come second only to her husband’s family.

Their oldest daughter, Erin, 33, recently became a lawyer and works as a law clerk for 1st District Appellate Justice Terrence J. Lavin. Their youngest daughter, Tracy, 30, runs a fashion consulting business for high-end women’s clothes.

Neither is married, but both live in Chicago. “All things in due time,” he said when asked if he wants grandchildren.

Joan and Bob Clifford serve as trustees of the Naples Children and Education Foundation (NCEF), which supports underprivileged children in Collier County, Fla. The family owns a home there dating back to the 1980s and began working with the foundation in 2004.

This year they chaired the NCEF’s Naples Winter Wine Festival, which featured an auction with six-figure wine collections and a package that included a private concert from LeAnn Rimes and dinner from Tom Colicchio, the chef and host of the reality TV show “Top Chef.”

That concert-dinner package sold for $1.2 million.

Pricey items like that helped the event raise $12.5 million in a 4½-hour auction this year. That total outpaced last year’s amount by about $4 million.

In Joan’s letter, she wrote about her husband: “It would not have been possible without Bob’s drive, enthusiasm and hard work, which always prevails in everything he does. In my mind, he is a champion of the law as well as of anything that comes his way.”

In addition to helping others through his wine enthusiasm, he also gives back through golf, his other hobby. He plays some of the best courses across the country and made two holes-in-one.

“One was a complete fluke,” he said. Holderman said while he played golf in Scotland, he told a group of caddies that he lived in Chicago.

“They said, ‘Oh, do you know Bob Clifford?’” Holderman said.

The caddies know Clifford, but it has nothing to do with his golf game.

Clifford helped a group of them acquire U.S. work visas and workers’ compensation insurance after the U.S. Department of Labor challenged their plan to work at a country club he belongs to in Naples, Fla.

“They were going to be stuck in an airport,” Clifford said.

“I made them unstuck … And that goes to treating people like you’d like to be treated. And I’ve made a lot of friends that way, whether it’s caddies or presidents.”

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