

TRACY BRAMMEIER

Building a Reputation in Transportation Injury Plaintiff's Law

by Elizabeth Davies

Tracy A. Brammeier doesn't mind when opponents assume that being a young woman makes her less of a lawyer. That just means the Clifford Law Offices associate has one more advantage.

"It's my secret weapon to have people underestimate me," the 31-year-old says. "If people want to assume that because I'm smiling, I'm not as good of a lawyer, that's a benefit to me."

Case in point: Brammeier walked into a deposition with her usual bubbly and friendly demeanor. She began questioning her subject—an older, intelligent man. His confidence dropped as her line of questioning continued.

"When I got him on something, he said, 'Oh, I see what you did there!'" she recalls.

Her ability to be both assertive and kind sets her apart in her personal injury practice.

"What makes Tracy special is her poise and winning personality, coupled with her legal acumen," says Tom Gibbons, a retired criminal defense lawyer and also Brammeier's father. "She is always upfront with and courteous to others, which can sometimes be difficult due to the adversarial nature of the profession. Nonetheless, she is not intimidated by anyone, and she stands her ground if she feels she has a strong argument."

That could be one reason why last year Brammeier was named a "Young Lawyer with Exceptional Promise" by the Chicago Bar Association's Young Lawyer Section.

Certainly, she has built an impressive resume since joining Clifford in 2011. Brammeier has worked on several cases in which bicyclists were hit by trucks, and she represented a man who was hurt after being run over by a forklift. Also, she was on a trial team that secured a \$21.5 million verdict for the drowning of a 6-year-old boy.

As Brammeier's practice grows, it's also narrowing in scope. She has become an increasingly expert lawyer on transportation injuries. She assisted in a 2012 Union Pacific derailment case, stemming from an incident in Glenview and which settled the weekend before trial. Additionally, she has handled car



and boating accident cases, and she is currently working on an aviation lawsuit.

"I would like to emerge as someone who is a leader in catastrophic transportation injury litigation," she says.

That's exactly where she is headed under the watchful eye of expert partners in her firm. It did not take long for Brammeier to prove herself to Clifford partner Kevin Durkin.

"Tracy is an incredibly talented, hardworking young lawyer who in a short period of time has shown excellent trial skills," he says. "She always conducts herself in a very professional manner. Her communication skills with clients are outstanding. When we have a tough legal question, we go to Tracy, who always comes up with the correct answer. We are proud to work with her."

THE ROAD LESS TRAVELED

Brammeier is a part of her firm's team in lawsuits against Boeing, following its Ethiopian Airlines crash. In March 2019, a new Boeing airplane crashed in Ethiopia, killing all 157 people on board. It was the second such fatality featuring a new Boeing model, and critics accuse the company of rushing it through production.

Getting her feet wet on such a significant case undoubtedly is giving Brammeier further insight into the aviation industry.

"That's a niche area of the law that I'm excited to be part of and get great experience in right now," she says.

But it's not the first time one of Brammeier's cases has made headlines. After a week of trial, she was part of a \$35 million settlement that maxed out a policy limit. In that instance, her client had been standing on a sidewalk when a semi-truck drove past and caught her. The driver didn't realize what had happened, and the woman was dragged down the road by the truck, sustaining serious injury that caused ongoing health problems.

Working alongside firm partners Kevin Durkin and Bob Clifford, Brammeier was pleased with the end result in that case.

"I worked on that case from start to finish," she says. "Being on trial with Kevin Durkin and Bob Clifford was really exciting."

Brammeier also recalls a case she settled on the eve of trial with a good outcome for her client. In that case, Brammeier's client was one of four plaintiffs who had been in Lake Michigan on a rented boat in 2014 when their craft sank at sunset. The group was seven miles from shore in the cold lake, and the boat's radio wasn't working. They were not found until the following morning. Of the four people on board, three did not survive.

Brammeier brought a suit against the boat rental company and the maintenance company

that had worked on the boat. It was an opportunity to practice the law in a unique way.

“Because there were four plaintiffs involved, I was able to work closely with three other law firms,” she says. “That was a great experience.”

Clifford partner Sean Driscoll believes Brammeier has the qualities to succeed.

“She gets it,” Driscoll says. “She can issue-spot, she understands how to get from Point A to trial. She’s a quick study.”

“In this business, that’s promising for a long career,” he says.

AN EARLY INTEREST IN LAW

Given Brammeier’s proclivity for the law, it might be surprising to learn it wasn’t her first career choice.

Brammeier grew up in south suburban Palos Park as the oldest of four children. Each of the other siblings pursued engineering careers. But Brammeier studied English and communication at Loyola University before taking a marketing job. She soon found, however, that she didn’t want to spend her entire career doing that.

“I realized it wasn’t something I would be passionate about,” she says.

Brammeier’s father wasn’t at all surprised to hear his daughter announce plans for law school. He remembers an instance when she was in junior high and needed to write a position paper. She chose the Chicago Seven trial and tracked down one of the jurors in the case. Gibbons drove his daughter to the juror’s house, where she interviewed the woman about her experience.

“After the interview, Tracy did further research on the trial and then wrote an excellent position paper arguing for the defense,” he says. “I was impressed that Tracy understood the importance of research and gathering information from multiple sources, and I was also impressed that she had taken the initiative to call a stranger and interview her before writing her position paper.”

“I knew then that Tracy had the makings of a good lawyer.”

Even so, Gibbons expressed his reservations.

“While I was proud of her ambition, I nonetheless discouraged her, saying that practicing law can be a stressful and demanding career,” he recalls. “Tracy brushed aside my concerns, saying, ‘Dad, I will be fine,’ and she moved forward with total confidence in her ability to handle the rigors of the profession.”

“She clearly made the right decision. She is an enthusiastic and energetic attorney who takes the pressures of litigation in stride.”

Brammeier attended Loyola University Chicago School of Law, and to this day

she appreciates that a Chicago-based law school afforded her local opportunities and launched her into a career with a great professional network.

Even as a law student, however, Brammeier knew from the onset that she didn’t want to be a criminal defense lawyer like her father.

“He had a very interesting career, but I also saw the day-to-day reality of that work,” she says. “Still, it’s nice to have that common bond today.”

She did take away an important lesson from watching her dad at work when she shadowed him during high school at the criminal courts on 26th Street.

“When we walked into the courtroom, the prosecutor greeted my dad with a smile, and they chatted briefly in a friendly manner. Then she came over and introduced herself to me. The small exchange made a big impression on me,” she says.

“While I was proud of her ambition, I nonetheless discouraged her. Tracy brushed aside my concerns, saying, ‘Dad, I will be fine,’ and she moved forward with total confidence in her ability to handle the rigors of the profession.”

“I didn’t realize it then, but looking back, I learned very early on from my father the importance of collegiality with opposing counsel and what a difference it can make.”

She got an up-close look at the judicial system during law school, however, working as an extern for U.S. District Court Judge Thomas M. Durkin in the Northern District of Illinois.

“Working for a judge has given me an idea of the perspective of the judiciary,” she says. “It reminds me to approach my issues and write my briefs with the big picture in mind, and it helps me prioritize my arguments. I think sometimes it’s easy to fall into the trap of trying to make the law fit your facts when a judge will be applying your facts to the law.”

When Brammeier finished law school and began working at Clifford Law Offices, she found the fulfillment she had been looking for all along.

“Having that autonomy, while doing something to drive change, was something I preferred to being a cog in the corporate wheel,” she says. “To my surprise, I found out I really liked litigation and, more specifically, I

liked how we litigate in this office.”

She had spent time at Clifford as an intern during law school, working alongside fellow student Caitlin Donohue. Now an associate at Pretzel & Stouffer, Chartered, Donohue continues to think highly of Brammeier.

“Tracy is a team player,” she recalls. “We often worked on trials together that required us to divvy up motions in limine, trial briefs or abstracting several days’ worth of trial testimony with short deadlines.”

“Tracy would be the teammate I would choose over and over again if I could. You could count on her to shoulder her part of the work while making the process collaborative and enjoyable.”

Since launching their respective careers, Donohue has continued to be impressed.

“Tracy doesn’t do anything by half measure,” she says. “She didn’t just set out to become a lawyer, she engaged in the Chicago legal community, and she takes leadership roles whenever possible. She doesn’t just try cases, she immerses herself in legal issues that run deeper than the resolution of any one case.”

TAKING THE RIGHT APPROACH

Early on, Brammeier found that her job as a personal injury lawyer extended far beyond the courtroom. It included empathy, patience and compassion.

“You have to understand that your client’s situation is impossible,” she says. “It’s not something they could prepare for. Now I know that’s something I can work through with the client. I’m a new face at first, but once we build trust over time, we can form a good relationship.”

Brammeier says those relationships are critical to performing her job well.

“It is so important to earn the trust of your clients by being honest with them and making them feel prioritized and protected,” she says. “If you can build that relationship from the outset, it is much easier to have a clear channel of communication when it is time to explain options and consequences and to obtain authority to act on their behalf.”

“Additionally, so much decision making by lawyers is based on information learned from clients, so you need your clients to feel like they can be forthright with you so there are no surprises later on.”

Beyond the scope of her practice, Brammeier also believes in working to make the Chicago legal community a better place. She volunteers on the Judicial Evaluation Committee for the Chicago Bar Association. She is on the board of managers for the Illinois Trial Lawyers Association and is part of the American Association for Justice.

Brammeier is the incoming second vice chair for the Chicago Bar Association's Young Lawyer's Section. Last year, she was in charge of the Young Lawyer's annual fundraising event for the Chicago Bar Foundation. She raised a record \$30,000 through the casino night she organized.

"I'm also involved in the CBA's conversations and planning surrounding the future of the profession and bar membership, working to enhance and update its benefits and utility for the younger generation of lawyers," she says.

Brammeier also works with Wills for Heroes, a group of lawyers who draw up free wills and power of attorney orders for first responders. Additionally, she volunteers with the 100 Club of Chicago, providing assistance for fallen first responders. She fields phone calls from families who have lost a loved one and tries to help answer questions and provide resources.

"They'll call me and be worried about what will happen with their house," she says. "When a firefighter doesn't have a will, there's less certainty for their family. Getting those phone calls is difficult and part of the reason I'm involved with Wills for Heroes."

Her ongoing work ethic away from her firm is a source of pride for her father.

"I admire her desire to make a difference in the profession through her leadership roles in the Chicago Bar Association and through her volunteer work in numerous pro bono activities," Gibbons says. "I also respect her integrity. She is always truthful and honest, and she possesses a high moral character."

Brammeier feels fortunate to have the support of her family, including husband, Brian. As the owner of a computer services company, his job is not 9-to-5 either, she adds. "He understands the hectic and unpredictable schedule I have."

Still, the pair finds time to enjoy new Chicago restaurants and traveling to visit out-of-state family. From their home in Bucktown, Brammeier takes advantage of her quick access to running and bicycling routes.

That downtime fuels her, giving Brammeier the clarity to return to work and take on a new day. Her career is one that is moving full-speed ahead—and there's no place she would rather be.

"I feel lucky to be at an office where I have great examples of ethical lawyering and an opportunity to be involved in meaningful cases," she says.

"Not only can I make a difference, but I can also be the rock a client leans on. It's nice to be the person they call to make things better." ■