The Life and Career of Steve Yerrid: Trial Lawyer and owner of The Yerrid Law Firm

Yerrid’s love for the law was born during his youth growing up in West Virginia.

"My mother was a single parent — she was my hero. She was raising me on $300 a month from her secretarial salary," he says.

"One of our highlights was watching the Perry Mason show. I always liked the drama of the courtroom and ultimately the truth coming out. I’ve learned since that the truth doesn’t always come out, but that was the beginning of my idea that ‘Wow, you can make a difference when you go in a courtroom.’ Great things can happen. I wasn’t sure what justice was back then, but it was the notion of fairness and having everything turn out right."

As Yerrid grew older, his idea to defend justice didn’t go away, so he eventually attended and graduated from Georgetown University Law Center.

"I’ve never thought about being anything else but a trial lawyer," he says.

Immediately after he finished law school and passed the bar, Yerrid scored an amazing opportunity to work with Holland & Knight, which since then has blossomed into a firm with more than 1,000 attorneys. He was hired as the 52nd lawyer at the time. With a trial section that consisted of two or three attorneys, Yerrid had his work cut out for him.

"I got an opportunity to go to the best law firm in Florida at the time — they were very selective in their hiring. I became a trial lawyer and got a lot of experience, which is something young lawyers don’t have much opportunity to do now," Yerrid says.

When he was still very young, at the age of 29, Yerrid represented John Lerro, the captain of the Summit Venture freighter that crashed into the Sunshine Skyway Bridge in 1980, which killed 35 people. After winning the infamous case with an "act of God" defense, Yerrid soon made partner at the firm.

As the firm grew enormously over the next decade, Yerrid started to get the urge to downsize to a smaller, more focused practice.

"I just wanted a boutique trial firm," he says. "I just wanted to be around trial lawyers who understood evidence, courtroom proof, and wanted to make a difference — take good causes and make sure people have an opportunity to have their cause heard on a level playing field, which is not an easy task."

Yerrid started his own firm, The Yerrid Law Firm, and remains there today.

In 1997 Yerrid was part of the 11-person legal team for the state of Florida against Big Tobacco on behalf of Florida taxpayers and children. The team managed a $17 billion judgment, which is referred to as the largest civil monetary settlement of its kind in the nation’s history.

"Even today the state of Florida gets hundreds of millions of dollars each year and will for the next couple decades as a result of that settlement. More importantly, we retired the Marlboro Man forever, and we DOA’d Joe Camel, all of his progeny, and all his friends. The child pandering and advertising were concessions that the state of Florida got," Yerrid says.

And thanks to the most-favored-nation clause, all the judgment’s guidelines were applied to the rest of the United States.

Still on a quest to beat out the tobacco industry, Yerrid recently sued Governor Jeb Bush to try to fulfill the broken promises of funding the state’s teen anti-smoking campaigns. In the end, Yerrid was able to help pass a constitutional amendment in the state of Florida that requires 10% of the money from the Big Tobacco settlement to go to funding the programs.

Yerrid also started an organization called the Yerrid Foundation, which funds many pediatric-cancer and related causes, including research, care, and projects for 30 to 40 organizations. Additionally, the foundation
hosts a variety of events for children with cancer, including a fishing derby and Christmas in July.

Last year Yerrid had another big win — $217 million — for a malpractice verdict for Allan Navarro, a man who was left paralyzed when emergency room personnel misdiagnosed his stroke as a sinus infection, even though his family has a strong history of strokes. The case was solely handled by David D. Dickey and Richard A. Gilbert of de la Parte & Gilbert up until the trial, when they called Yerrid in to be the lead counsel.

"With the clients and the attorneys putting in their fees, we gave a million dollars to spinal cord research. We were able to do that to show that good things can happen, and we wanted to show that we understood what a quadriplegic person looks like and what a paraplegic person's handicaps are. We wanted to help, so we gave back; it's like a reverse Robin Hood. We took the wrongdoer's money and made it good," says Yerrid.

Yerrid also wrote a book called *When Justice Prevails*, an account of eight of his most dynamic cases, which was published in 2003.

"It's not a 'Let me tell you what a great lawyer I am.' It's more like the challenges of trying to achieve justice in today's society, and too often money decides the outcomes in courtrooms. It was just about the travails of clients going through a journey to justice and what happens to them after a verdict. It also has my final arguments and the reactions of the jurors as I gave the arguments," he says.

The book covers the Sunshine Skyway Bridge case, the case that made banks liable for ATM security, and the case of a man who was wrongfully diagnosed with brain cancer.

**Q. What do you like to do in your spare time?**

**A.** I'm addicted to fishing and the water. If it's a beautiful day outside and there's water near, you most likely will find me on the water doing something. If it's a dark, nasty day, you can still find me on the water fishing.

**Q. Throughout your life, what movie have you watched the most?**

**A.** *Braveheart*.

**Q. What CD is in your CD player right now?**

**A.** Celine Dion. I also like Barbra Streisand and Dionne Warwick.

**Q. What is your favorite flavor of ice cream?**

**A.** Vanilla with hot fudge.

**Q. If you had an extra hour in the day, what would you spend it doing?**

**A.** I would spend it looking around and appreciating my life more. I've got less time ahead than I've had behind, and there's just a lot of miracles.

Throughout his successful and fulfilling career, Yerrid has found mentorship from a variety of people. Chesterfield Smith, the founder of *Holland & Knight* and former ABA president, taught Yerrid lessons about individual rights and liberties for all people, regardless of race or gender.

John Germany, a partner from Holland & Knight as well as the youngest judge ever appointed in Florida, is described as "pivotal" by Yerrid when explaining his impact on him.

Paul Hardy, someone Yerrid describes as a "nautical maritime guy," taught him about the law of the sea and helped him a great deal in his career.
"My best mentors would probably be my mother and father," adds Yerrid. "They taught me the difference between right and wrong. Doing the right thing and helping people has clearly been a blessing that I’ve received. I try to take causes and clients that make a difference — people I believe in and things that I’d like to see in a vision for the future that will make the world a better place."

Yerrid encourages the lawyers of today, new and old, "to never give up your principles or your values." He continues, "There’s a lot of pressure and people willing to skirt the truth. There’s a duty on all of us to set forth good principles and believe in good causes and not take frivolous ones. Just do good work and show people that, in fact, we’re pretty significant players in the movement of our society and the way we set standards.

"If every effort is made in a case and the rightness of the cause is there, then it will turn out fine, and it will be something you can always be proud of. At the end of the day, that is the single most important thing."

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