

BRUCE WARREN

Central Illinois' Well-Known Workers' Comp Defense Lawyer

by Josh Weinhold



CHAMPAIGN—You might know Bruce E. Warren by his email address. Or the license plate he once had.

A partner at Thomas, Mamer & Haughey, LLP in Champaign who practices primarily in workers' compensation cases isn't afraid to boldly state his goals to anyone sending him a message or driving behind him.

"NoTTD," they proclaim—meaning "no total temporary disability," the benefit his business clients are always hoping to avoid paying to injured workers.

"I still get laughs out of it," he says, "especially from a new client."

The moniker is legendary among the workers' compensation bar. Once, a young associate was traveling to an unfamiliar downstate town, couldn't find the courthouse, then saw Warren's car and followed him, knowing they must be going to the same place.

But what's equally well known is Warren's reputation as a strong but reasonable advocate for his clients, which include PepsiCo, Kraft and the University of Illinois.

The goal he has in mind is always clear, his colleagues say, but he won't stab you in the back to get there.

"The nature of Bruce's practice demands friendly adversarial relationships," says Richard Johnson, a partner at Katz Friedman in Chicago who has represented petitioners against Warren for more than 25 years. "He

is not the sort of fellow who is going to yell or scream or holler. He elevates the level of civility in the room, and that's something people really respond to."

A WINDING ROAD

You might know Warren because of his father—if you lived around downstate Fairfield in the mid-20th century.

His dad ran a used car lot, and his mother took care of the books and their home. Warren was around the dealership constantly, naturally picking up the ins and outs of running a business.

He also picked up a sense of grit and determination that has been essential to his success in the world of workers' compensation.

"My dad was the toughest guy I ever knew, and that's part of my personality now," he says. "You have to be able to roll with the punches in this business and see the humor in it because it's not always humorous work."

Early on, Warren never thought about becoming a lawyer, but his dad—despite having no formal schooling himself—emphasized the importance of getting a good education to Warren and his two brothers, who both have doctorates now. He went to the University of Illinois, majored in English, but was unsure of what his career path would be.

After graduation, he got a job managing a jeans store at the mall. It wasn't the best gig,

but it did lead him to meet Pam, now his wife of 36 years.

He taught high school English for three years, drove a cab, and worked as a DJ on local pop and rock stations. Planning on a career in radio, he moved to Carbondale to pursue a master's degree in telecommunications while Pam worked toward her doctorate in psychology.

In a media law class, he found his new passion. Enthralled by the topics—and ultimately inspired to write his master's thesis on whether Illinois should allow cameras in courtrooms—he took the LSAT and scored well. Then he enrolled at the Southern Illinois University School of Law after earning his master's.

While in law school, he got a job clerking at a local firm, Mitchell, Brandon & Schmidt, which took him on as an associate after graduation. He began learning all about insurance defense matters. On the first day he had his law license, the firm sent him to court—an immediately energizing experience.

"I'm a victim of a series of coincidences, and this was another one that guided me on the path I ended up on," he says. "I probably would have enjoyed any area of law, but this is the one I learned how to do, so I just stuck with it."

The Warrens moved to Champaign in 1991, where Warren had landed a position at his current firm, which was expanding its workers'

compensation defense practice. His work involved far more direct contact with his clients and far less work with insurance companies.

The clients he is closest with and has done the most business for over the years are all self-insured—companies that want to control their own destiny when it comes to workers' compensation cases and prefer to deal directly with their lawyer.

"I grew up in a business and know some of the perils of that," he says. "I can sympathize when they tell me this comp case I'm handling isn't the most important thing they have going on. I try to stay out of their hair and make it easier to get through life."

Warren's philosophy for handling cases is simple—he works for the client, not the other way around. What a client wants him to do, he does. While his decades of experience mean he's just about seen it all before and can anticipate how things will play out, he is there to chart the course his clients want to take on their cases.

"They pay for our expertise, for our knowledge, and our insight, and then they tell us what to do," he says. "If my idea is 'A' is best and they want to do 'B,' I go and do 'B.' My key phrase is 'I work for you.'"

Such a philosophy also requires a large degree of ego suppression, a rejection of any my-way-or-the-highway tendencies.

"I can't be of the attitude that what I think is right has to be the be-all, end-all of how that is handled," he says. "The client has got to have input."

COMFORTABLE ENVIRONMENT

You might know Warren by his relaxed, laid-back style in his office.

Gone are the days of him wearing a suit and tie every day. Now, he's more often seen in blue jeans and a long-sleeved shirt. Rather than framed diplomas on his wall, he opts for posters of Ernest Hemingway, an overhead photo of the region, and a painting by a local artist. He's got a soft armchair for clients and a standing desk made of oak and leather.

When clients come to see him, he prefers they feel like they're entering a drawing room rather than a law firm.

When he's in court, though, his approach isn't so informal. Over time, the man with "NoTTD" on his car became known for his "Bruce Warren Defense."

"I'm tough but fair, and I can be as tough as a client wants," he says. "I don't like to hand out money. In our business, controlling the flow of money from our side to the other is essential. They're not going to get it easily."

But a Bruce Warren Defense, his opponents say, isn't about being a feisty bulldog at all times. It's about being tactical, focused and concentrated on only what might turn a case.

"All of his effort is put onto the critical issue—and he beats you over the head with it," Johnson says. "He's not horsing around. He tries a lot of cases, and he's confident he knows what they're worth. So, if you're negotiating with him and you're not in the ballpark, you're going to be trying that case. He doesn't want his client to pay more than he thinks they should pay."

When you go up against Warren, the fight may not be easy, but it will be fair.

"You know exactly what you're going to get—there is no deception or delusion or sugar-coating," says Paul E. Selin, a Champaign attorney who has been adversaries with Warren for 30 years.

"He's friendly, he's fair, he's zealous on behalf of his clients. When the battle starts, you know there's not going to be any blows below the belt, no cheap headshots. I just trust him. Bruce makes sure that the game is played by the rules."

After conducting hundreds of workers' compensation trials, Warren knows the process well. He anticipates the twist and turns. He knows what to expect from petitioners' lawyers. And after decades working with the collegial group of attorneys on the other side, he's built a rapport that helps lead to outcomes that both sides are satisfied with.

"You can't stab a guy in the back this week because you're going to see him again next week," he says. "Being able to rely on your opposition to be forthright with you, because you're going to do the same, makes the practice easier to get through. I like to have good relationships with other lawyers on both sides because that's the secret to being successful for your client."

HIGH BAR OF RESPECT

For all he's seen and done before, it's essential for him to remember he doesn't know everything. Especially in an area of law where no discovery happens prior to trying a case, there are bound to be surprises. And a truly skilled lawyer is ready even for those.

"Lots of times, you're sitting down trying a case and something completely unexpected will come up," he says. "Thinking on your feet is one of the key skills on this end of the job. I've learned to do that and not panic, which is your natural inclination."

While Warren can be counted on to have a laserlike focus on the important issues and have a surprise or two of his own awaiting, opponents say they also expect nothing but an upstanding and forthright defense from him.

"You can be a gentleman to a lawyer when you realize they'll be that way to you," Selin says. "Getting evidence into trial can be miserable. You can make your opponent jump through all these hoops for no reason, or you

can say 'It's fine, I'm not going to be that guy.' He's a reasonable one."

After decades of cases, he knows what judges and juries want to hear—and what they don't need to hear. He's always attuned to what has already been covered in a case and what doesn't need to be rehashed. He's respectful of everyone's time and knows how to keep everyone's attention.

In his practice, maintaining respect and not burning bridges is important when dealing with lawyers on the other side because you're likely to see them again in court soon. But it's also important for Warren's clients, ensuring they don't act in too cutthroat a manner as to rattle their employees and harm morale among their workforce.

"Workers' compensation is a labor-relations business," Johnson says. "He's very good about managing the interests of all parties. If his action appears to be arbitrary or capricious, word spreads. That's where Bruce's sensitivity really pays dividends. You want a happy workforce and a productive workforce."

COMMITMENT TO THE JOB

You might know Warren, since 2015, as the managing partner of his firm.

He took over the role that year from his colleague and close friend, David A. Bailie, who had held the position for 16 years.

Thanks to his childhood and his clients, Warren is familiar with what it takes to run a business, and he's relished the opportunity to help make his firm more successful. He's lowered their overhead through reviewing vendor agreements and other contracts. He also handled the new lease on their building—the same one the firm has been in since 1946, though in that time they've expanded from three rooms to 3½ floors.

Away from the office, Warren is an avid Harley-Davidson motorcycle rider, a hobby he's rekindled the last dozen years. He plays the guitar and gathers with a group of lawyers in an office once a month to jam.

His wife, Dr. Pamela A. Warren, is a clinical psychologist, and his daughter, Rachel, works for the State University Retirement System.

So, whether you know him for his email address, his license plate, his family history, or his leadership role, you likely know a few things about Warren. You know he's hard-working, you know he's determined, and you know he's fair.

Warren just knows he enjoys being a lawyer, and he wouldn't change his circuitous path to his current position for anything.

"I look at this profession as a job, and one you have to work pretty hard at to get a good result," he says. "But it's really just all about hard work and the accumulation of knowledge as the years go by." ■