



# Profile: William Veen

*Sensitivity proves to be a road to empathy for this accomplished attorney.*

## STEPHEN ELLISON

The melding of shrewdness and sensitivity is almost unheard of in trial law circles, considered by many a sign of fragility, insecurity or weakness.

Twenty years ago, William Veen probably would have concurred with that school of thought. Today, he might just think twice.

"A lot of people don't realize how emotional I am," says Veen, founder and principal of The Veen Firm of San Francisco. "Sometimes these cases get to me, when I think about the pain these people have gone through or are going through."

Publicly, Veen is more inclined to flaunt his hardened side, the one that has enabled him to try three to four cases a year for the past 20 years without losing. And these haven't been of the cut-and-dried variety. Indeed, if Veen is involved in a case, there's a reason.

"Bill does not represent the rich and famous, rather the poor and defenseless, who need someone willing to take a risk and invest enormous costs in order to ensure a just result," longtime colleague, Jerry Spolter, said when presenting Veen with the Lifetime Achievement Award at the 2008 San Francisco Trial Lawyers Association banquet. "Sometimes these folks have less than pristine backgrounds."

Spolter, a mediator for JAMS, went on to tell the gathering how Veen discovered one client, a convicted drug addict, had lied at deposition, in preparatory interviews, even to Veen himself. Where any other attorney would have swiftly packed up and abandoned the case, Veen rededi-



Veen

cated himself, canceling a long-planned, prepaid vacation to Europe. He addressed his client's deception – called it "redemption" during jury selection and opening statements, Spolter said – and the result was a multimillion-dollar verdict.

The moral, in Spolter's words: "Even injured folks with a splotchy past are entitled to a competent and vigorous advocate."

## Bumpy beginnings

Born and raised in Grosse Pointe, Michigan – where he assumed the dubious label of "juvenile delinquent" – Veen recalls having no designs on higher education. Until, that is, at some point he bore witness to and was rather impressed by "the powerlessness of the individual." That specific event triggered an unexpected and somewhat ironic interest in law.

Veen graduated from Michigan State University and upon finishing law school at the University of Michigan passed the California bar. He began working for a defense firm in San Francisco and was part of a team of lawyers representing General Motors when he came to what would be a career-altering realization.

"It didn't take long before I was thinking to myself, I'm not on the right side of this particular fence," he recalls.

Veen found solace in, of all things, the military. He was drafted in 1968 during the Vietnam War and became a legal specialist for the Judge Advocate General (JAG) in the United States Coast Guard, stationed in

Hawaii. During his four-year military stint, he represented parties in numerous court martial and Investigative Board procedures and managed to earn the Coast Guard Achievement Medal; awarded for outstanding leadership, professional achievement and superior performance of duty in either peacetime or combat situations. He left the Coast Guard in 1972 with the rank of Lieutenant Commander, after which he "bummed around the island for about a year-and-a-half," he says.

When Veen arrived at the inevitable career decision, he opted against applying his law expertise in favor of the GMs of the world.

"Eventually, I found out that I'd really rather represent people than large corporations," he says.

## A firm hand

In 1975, he started The Veen Firm with a mere \$5,000. It consisted of one lawyer (himself) and a tiny office that rented for \$135 a month and was adorned by used furniture obtained from the March of Dimes, Veen says.

"I was already a specialist in workers' comp, so I had that going for me. It just sort of grew from there," he says. "Within eight months, I hired another lawyer. Of course, when you own your own business, you tend to take anything (clients) that walks through the door. But that's something I would advise against now. Work on developing your business."

That, he did. On the way, Veen also developed a reputation for resourcefulness, inventiveness and unbridled gumption. According to Spolter, The Veen Firm's verdicts often are used as exhibits



in other plaintiffs' attorney's briefs and cause defendants to pause when they would otherwise discount a plaintiff's case as weak and unfounded.

"Through sheer intellect and creativity, Bill (invented) a whole new element of special damages," Spolter says.

One case Spolter likes to refer to when speaking of Veen involved a group of clients injured on a shuttle bus about 10 years ago. During the mediation stage, Veen demanded the usual financial damages – medical bills, wage loss, etc. – with one addition: \$760,000 in "loss of household services." The defense all but laughed in Veen's face and the case proceeded to trial. The jury awarded every penny of the household damages.

### **Changing with the times**

Today, Veen focuses mostly on mediation and cases of a complex nature. He has been a longtime member of the

SFTLA – he served as president of the organization in 1994 – and was honored by its members in 2003 as Trial Lawyer of the Year. He also is called upon frequently as a lecturer and guest speaker and has published numerous articles on subjects such as trial strategy, vicarious liability and legal malpractice.

Veen says plaintiffs' lawyers have a number of hurdles today that were less apparent three decades ago. Chief among them – winning over juries is far more difficult, even for the most persuasive trial lawyer.

"Juries are a bit more skeptical these days," Veen says. "It comes and goes, but in general, I would say they're less able to empathize."

Over time, lawyers seemed to have changed, too. Now, having a soft side doesn't necessarily interfere with success. Veen no longer shies away from generosity and kindness, although some may be

surprised at his ability to intertwine his shrewd and sensitive ways.

"He is just an absolute sweet human being," says his wife Ellen Swayne Veen, a law professor and writer. "One of the kindest people I've ever met."

The Veens met at a meditation retreat for lawyers and married earlier this year. They love to travel, having recently trekked across the planet for a year-and-a-half with stops in New Zealand, Fiji and Nepal. Bill Veen called it the best education he could possibly get.

"Life is so exciting; I love to just feel the energy of it," he says. "One of the things I do for a living is feel that energy – really feel it."

*Stephen Ellison is a freelance writer based in San Jose, Calif. He is a regular contributor to the Silicon Valley/San Jose Business Journal and occasionally writes for a Gilroy, Calif., community magazine. He can be reached at [ssjellison@aol.com](mailto:ssjellison@aol.com).*