



Profile: Sal Liccardo: Determination and drive reach worldwide

From \$50 public defender cases to million-dollar lawsuits, Sal Liccardo's career spans 40 years – and he's still in the courtroom

STEPHEN ELLISON

Whether it is attending medical school, scrubbing up with the county pathologist or teaching communist law scholars about the finer points of the United States legal system, Salvador (Sal) A. Liccardo has rarely done anything halfway.

During his nearly 40-plus-year legal career, Liccardo has developed a reputation for his tenacity and resolve, as well as his fearlessness, making him one of the country's most respected and decorated plaintiffs' attorneys. He learned very early that being an effective trial lawyer means more than knowing procedure and having a gift for gab. It means a 100 percent commitment to his cases, and more important, to people. "I loved the idea of being able to help people," Liccardo explains, "people who were having hardships in every way you can imagine."

Carving his niche

The journey to becoming a lawyer for people began after Liccardo graduated from Santa Clara University School of Law in 1960. Liccardo received a few offers from various law firms, but none of the jobs paid more than he had made working as a grocery store clerk. Therefore, he decided to start his own practice,



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a bold venture for such a green and unproven member of the California State Bar.

In those days, the public defender's office did not exist. Private attorneys would sign up with the courts and be

assigned indigent clients. At \$50 per case, no matter how many hours the lawyers put into the case, the pay was minimal. However, for Liccardo, it amounted to a foot in the door.

"Within 30 days of passing the bar, I was working on my first felony criminal case," Liccardo recalled. "Needless to say, that experience was invaluable."

He soon tracked down an old high school pal and college buddy, Richard (Dick) Caputo. Caputo was also an attorney and had been in private practice for several years. At the time, Caputo was not prepared to hire another lawyer. Liccardo then proposed that he take on some of Caputo's cases to start, and a partnership was formed.

"Neither one of us knew what we were doing," Caputo recalls. "We were just a couple of young kids who thought we had some talent in trial work."

Indeed, the talent was in their experience. Liccardo began collecting

more and more personal injury cases, and trying them without fear because of his previous stints in the courtroom. In a sense, Liccardo had found a calling and it was one he truly dedicated himself to.

"I discovered that having knowledge of medicine was essential to personal injury cases. So I started taking short courses in medicine at night – courses that were designed for attorneys," Liccardo recalled. "Then, I learned about a program at UCSF, where they offered exactly the same medical courses that med students were required to take – only they were restricted to lawyers defending doctors in malpractice suits."

Already a seasoned trial lawyer by that time, Liccardo was becoming his own medical expert. He took his medical education a step further when he befriended two pathologists, who invited him to scrub up and stand in on autopsies.

"It was fantastic! I was seeing, touching, feeling parts of the body and understanding the human anatomy that way," he says. "I loved it."

Liccardo's determination and drive – not to mention the long days and nights – paid off when he took Johnson & Johnson to court for manufacturing a birth control pill that left a 29-year-old mother of three blind. The jury awarded \$1.25



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million, the highest pharmaceutical case verdict at the time. It was the first milestone of many to come.

Making strides for democracy

Liccardo went on to win more than his share of multi-million dollar verdicts and collected countless industry honors and awards. But it was his work as an instructor in a law workshop at China's Central Party School in 1990 that he considers "the most fascinating thing I've ever done in my career."

Liccardo and his colleagues purportedly were the first Westerners ever invited to the school, and they made quite an impression. "These were lawyers high up in the Chinese government. Very bright, very sharp people," Liccardo recalls. "I was concerned with how to prepare myself – what to anticipate. To my relief, the first question was, 'How do you justify ethically, morally, legally when clients tell you they committed a crime, that you continue defending them and you don't put them on the witness stand?'"

Liccardo proceeded to explain the fundamentals of American law regarding the assumption of innocence, burden of proof and protection from self-incrimina-

tion. When he was finished, the gathering of 75 to 100 Chinese lawyers began "chattering" in their native tongue, causing a renewed anxiety in Liccardo. However, as he found out seconds later, his simple explanation of the very substance of the U.S. judicial system turned out to be a first step in rewriting Chinese law.

"When the buzz finally died down, the woman who asked the question turned to me and said, 'We must do this, and do this now.' That was such an amazing thing," Liccardo recounts. "Ever since then, (the Central Party School) sends two faculty members to our annual workshop in Hawaii. They've switched their burden of proof, they're just now adopting a system of torts and we're helping them develop human rights' laws."

Time management

When Caputo settled into semi-retirement in 2000, Liccardo took it as a cue to make a career decision of his own. He decided he had had enough of managing people, and it was time to get back to what he loved doing and what he was best at: trying cases.

"If you had asked me 20 years ago if I would still be trying cases today, I

would have said, 'No way,'" Liccardo stated, "but I find it easier than ever."

At the Liccardo Law Firm, Sal works with his son, Paul Liccardo. Sal has reduced his caseload from nearly 200 to about six or eight. He is also able to work mostly from home, where he gets in "more concentrated time" because he is not spending hours fighting the Silicon Valley traffic.

With some of that spare time, Liccardo stays physically active on the golf links and on the ski slopes. He also keeps his fingers nimble on the piano and his tastebuds primed testing his own barbecue sauce recipes.

So, when does the 'R' word come into play for him?



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"My philosophy is that retirement is when you do what you want to do and stop doing what you have to do," Liccardo opined. "Since I'm doing what I want to do and what I love to do, I guess I'm already retired."

Stephen Ellison is a business journalist and freelance writer based in San Jose, Calif.