



Donald Galine

San Mateo attorney always fought for the underdog – now he's in the fight of his life

BY STEPHEN ELLISON

Donald L. Galine for years has fought battles on behalf of others against some pretty tough opponents – and he's done it with a smile. Today, Galine is waging a daily war against the most daunting adversary imaginable. He's fighting for his life against brain cancer.

And still, he smiles.

"I'm doing pretty well," said Galine, who was diagnosed with glioblastoma on June 12 and had brain surgery July 1, followed by six weeks of radiation therapy.

"Back in May, I started having these really bad headaches – I thought I was getting migraines," Galine recalled while speaking from his San Mateo office. "This went on for about five, six weeks. I was taking migraine pills, but it just kept getting worse. Finally, I went to the doctor and he said, 'You have a tumor, and we have to take it out.' Just like that – one day I had a headache, and the next I was having brain surgery."

Although the one-day time frame was a bit of an exaggeration, everything seemed to be happening rather fast. And considering how quickly his life turned from business-as-usual, 12-hour-a-day trial lawyer to expect-the-unexpected, 24-hour-a-day cancer patient, Galine appeared to be doing incredibly well. But make no mistake, he's still in recovery mode.

The post-treatment effects are there – surgical scars, loss of hair, fatigue – to say nothing of the internal physical and mental anguish commonly associated with such a condition. "They've been minimal for me," Galine said of the after-effects. "They give me pills for my stomach (nausea)." And there are other medications, including a steroid called dexamethasone to control the swelling in his brain.



Galine

So he presses on, determined to prevail. He's back at work part-time, discussing cases with his partners, and is eager to build on that. "My goal is to get back to about 80 or 90 percent," he said of his job as senior partner of Galine, Frye & Fitting.

For the underdog

Galine makes no bones about his "root for the underdog" mentality. Not only is he applying it to his survival today, but it's also what attracted him to plaintiff law in the first place. "I've always been for the underdog, and I always will be," he said. "People should have representation, even when they can't afford it. I've never been involved in representing insurance companies or big businesses. I've never even had the desire to do it – that's just not me."

Frank Pitre of Cotchett, Pitre & McCarthy, who has known Galine the better part of 25 years, believes it's in his friend's nature to help those who need it most. "Don has the biggest heart of any person you'll ever meet," Pitre said. "He's the consummate advocate for his clients. He's the kind of guy who takes cases other lawyers reject because he doesn't want to leave someone without hope. He's not afraid to take those cases, and he wins them. People respect him for that."

Law actually started as a fallback for Galine. As a teacher and coach, beginning his career in the late 1970s in California, he soon discovered that the residuals of Proposition 13 wouldn't be providing many options in his field. So, he began studying law on the side while continuing to teach. "I was really into

history. I ended up with a (high school) teaching and coaching job and started going to law school at night," Galine recalled. "I kept at it (coaching and teaching) after graduating from law school. Finally, I decided I better get a job that's more permanent and secure. And I did – I got one at a personal injury law firm while I was still coaching and teaching."

The Natural

That firm, Brewer & Kleiman, thrust Galine into trial law, and it didn't take him long to establish a reputation for his courtroom savvy. "There's no false airs about him; that's his secret," Pitre said. "Don in the courtroom is the same person he is on the street, and jurors love him for it. And his clients love him for it, too."

On top of his personal injury expertise, Galine quickly developed other specialties, such as product liability and workers' compensation. In a relatively short time after he started, the Burlingame firm became Brewer, Kleiman & Galine. A few more years and dozens of cases later, Galine and his two partners were ready to move on, and he decided to start his own firm.

"It was kind of fun when I took over – cases were coming in like crazy. We were doing (radio and TV) promotions. And it was very rewarding," Galine said. "When you have high school friends and college buddies who put their trust in you like that, it's a good feeling."

"Growing up in San Mateo, I already knew a lot of people in town," Galine continued. "I also worked the bar at the Circle Star Theater for a while. There are always cases out there. But I've been fortunate to know so many people – I've had sort of a built-in nucleus of people that would come to me."



Galine has had his share of memorable cases, including one in the early 1990s against then-San Francisco 49ers owner Eddie DeBartolo Jr., who was accused of sexual assault but ultimately not charged by the San Mateo County district attorney, according to a New York Times report. The woman, who said she met DeBartolo at a restaurant and went with him back to his Menlo Park townhome, where the alleged incident occurred, sought a civil suit and hired Galine. Galine got a settlement but was bound by a nondisclosure agreement.

Still a coach at heart

Galine's success in both teaching and law carried over seamlessly into leadership roles in organizations. He moved quickly up the ranks in Consumer Attorneys of California, serving on the Board of Governors for 10 years and as vice president for nearly 15 years. "They tried to get me to be president, but (Susan) didn't think it was a good idea," he said. "It takes up a lot of your time. I remember Rick Simons telling me, 'If you want to be president, plan to be away from your family a lot' – because you've got to be there. And all the money is in Southern California, so if you're in Northern California, you're on a plane every week going down there. And I had kids at the time."

Susan Galine said it worked out better for both parties that her husband didn't take the presidency. "In those days, they would want you to move up the ranks every year," she said. "In a way, I thought they got a lot out of Don by keeping him there as a vice president for a long time."

Pitre agreed. "People come and go in that organization. For the better part of three decades now, Don has always been there – as a supporter and as a leader."

In recent years, Galine has been honored as Chapter President of the Year and has received the Trench Soldiers Award (For Doing Battle In The Trenches Above and Beyond the Call of Duty), Hero Award and Presidential Award of Merit from CAOC. "He has spent years of his life fighting for the rights of individuals in our society," said David Casey of San Diego, who is a past CAOC president and has known Galine for about 25 years. "In the trial bar, he would always give 100 percent to any matter he took on and would do it with a smile and enthusiasm. He has also set a great example to lawyers in trial practice on the importance of family. He worked very hard in CAOC, but Sue and his children always came first."

Competing against the odds

Along with his devotion to family and work, Galine has an unbridled passion for the pool. He is a nationally ranked master swimmer – at one time No. 2 in the country in his age group – and still swims 1,200 meters a day. "It helps not only physically, but also mentally," he said.

Pitre remembers one vacation in Hawaii when he challenged Galine to a race. "I got half a pool length head start in a one-length-of-the-pool race," he said. "I won by a fingernail, and I'll never race him again."

As an athlete and former coach, Galine understands all too well the rigors of competition and how the odds-on favorites don't always win. It is with that mindset he is taking on an illness the National Cancer Institute says has a median survival rate of 14 months after standard treatment.

One clinical trial Galine is considering involves what he described as "wearing a space helmet 24 hours a day." The device, Susan Galine said, continuously

delivers small levels of electricity through the skull to keep the cancer cells from growing and to keep clean the area of the brain where the cancer was concentrated. In describing the whole ordeal from the time her husband was diagnosed to the present day, Susan said, "It's been horrifyingly fascinating."

One thing is for certain: Galine won't be alone in his fight against cancer. "I got something like 500 e-mails after I was first diagnosed," he said. "The response from the community was unbelievable. And the staff here has been wonderful. They've supported me from day one and taken over my cases."

Susan concurred: "We really couldn't have kept things going without them."

When asked how the teacher in him would advise a group of aspiring lawyers, Galine went with his belief that law is a personality-driven vocation and that young lawyers should follow their hearts. "Get into an area of law that's going to stimulate you, that's going to be fun for you," he said. "If you're going to do something for the rest of your life, make it something you're passionate about and that you'll enjoy. There's nothing worse than getting into a job you don't like."

As Galine conjured thoughts of what the future might hold, he talked about his love of poker and how he wouldn't mind coaching again. But ultimately the discussion came back to doing what he loves and what he does best. "I've always enjoyed practicing law; I'd still like to practice for as long as I can," he said.



Ellison

"It's great motivation to get up in the morning and help people."

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