



Profile: Al Stoll

Veteran trial lawyer embraces a more team-oriented approach to help achieve the coveted work-life balance

BY STEPHEN ELLISON

If all goes as planned, Albert G. Stoll, Jr. will be practicing law for years to come.

The founder and principal of AGS, a Law Corporation has managed to survive the toils of the typical hungry, young lawyer – long hours, skipping meals, seven-day work weeks – and now is intent on giving his life equal time.

“We talk a lot about trying to pay attention to how our work is affecting our lives in terms of making sure that our work here is fulfilling and rewarding and exceptional but at the same time making sure that it doesn’t define us as human beings,” Stoll explained. “We have family and friends and weekends, and we can get out of the office at five o’clock and get in at nine o’clock if we want to.”

As his firm has matured over the years, Stoll has added to its arsenal of lawyers, manifesting a more team-oriented approach so he and his colleagues at AGS can indeed establish that coveted work-life balance – and perhaps prolong their careers.

“It’s a cliché, but, you know, two heads are better than one, and 10 heads are better than two,” Stoll said. “We try to work well together so that we can take time off and not have to worry about coming in on a weekend.

“A lot of lawyers’ careers are cut short primarily because of burnout or cynicism or basically just getting too exhausted,” he added. “And then they quit, stop practicing prematurely. They get sick of it because it consumed their lives. There’s a lot of talent that the plaintiff bar loses out on because of that.”

That said, the AGS firm’s dedication and commitment to advocacy is stronger than ever. Stoll and his crew, for years among the premier motor-vehicle-accident and personal-injury litigators in Northern California, have expanded their areas of practice and legal expertise, Stoll said.



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They are taking on more dangerous road cases and recently delved into product liability and employment law.

Stoll, a veteran of more than 40 jury trials in his 15 years of practice, says

he doesn’t necessarily subscribe to a scripted approach when going to trial, but he does believe wholeheartedly that the most critical tool for any trial lawyer is establishing a personal connection with the client.

“There are a lot of different things I’ve learned over the years that are important, primarily getting to know your client in their environment – in their home, where they hang out, who they hang out with,” Stoll said. “A lot of times, if you do that, you’ll be such a good advocate that you’ll probably end up getting the case settled.

“If I had one philosophy,” he added, “it would be to spend as much time in your client’s environment as you can so you can really understand what they’re going through.”

Early influences

Stoll grew up in a small, rural town and said he always wanted to be a lawyer, although he wasn’t sure what area of law he would practice. After he graduated from UC Santa Barbara and started law school at Golden Gate University, his cousin (also his godfather), Bob Stoll, a lawyer based in Los Angeles, helped him gain his first exposure to plaintiffs’ law.

During his first year at Golden Gate, Stoll was looking for summer work, and his

cousin suggested he call an old college classmate and friend, Donald Galine.

“So I was a first-year law student, and I called Don,” Stoll recalled, “and he said ‘I don’t have any opportunities, but I’d like to invite you up to Harvey’s.’ The CTLA (California Trial Lawyers Association, now CAOC) meets there every year. He said ‘come on up, and I’ll introduce you to everybody.’ And he did. He introduced me to all the leaders at CTLA.

“Don was a real mentor and was the one who guided me as a young plaintiffs’ lawyer,” Stoll continued. “He had an infectious enthusiasm for plaintiffs’ lawyers and for being a lawyer in general.”

Galine, who died in May 2010, indeed taught Stoll the finer points of being a plaintiffs’ attorney – and he made it fun, Stoll said. That was enough to convince Stoll to pursue plaintiffs’ law in earnest, leading him to enroll in Bernie Segal’s prestigious trial lawyers program at Golden Gate.

Segal, who passed away in August, was another of Stoll’s early influences. “Bernie was inspiring in terms of the whole introduction to trial practice,” Stoll said.

After law school, Stoll got his first job with Alan Brayton’s firm working on plaintiffs’ asbestos cases. But it wasn’t long before he decided to open his own practice.

Creativity prevails

Among his firm’s many favorable results, Stoll recalled a pair of cases in which he and his colleagues essentially shamed the opposition with savvy investigative work.

The first involved a woman with dementia wandering off the premises of a nursing home in Yuba City and getting seriously injured. The home claimed it to be a rare occurrence, but Stoll and his associate, Walter Haynes, decided to dig. Haynes, a former California Highway Patrol officer, got the idea to check the 911 call history in and out of the facility.



With that, Stoll and Haynes were able to link up past calls to elderly persons walking out of the home. They found as many as three previous incidents before the defense attorney finally caved and said his client had lied, Stoll said.

“That was so satisfying to have a creative investigative technique employed to turn a case in a very positive direction for us,” he said. “Some cases get worse as you work on them, and some cases get better. And it’s a lot more fun when the case gets better.”

A second case in which a deeper probe helped AGS prevail, involved a pedestrian being struck by a Muni bus at Geary and Fillmore in San Francisco. Police reports of a couple of witness accounts indicated the pedestrian ran in front of the bus. But, again armed with the 911 call records, Stoll and Haynes found a man who had been sitting on a fire escape just above the intersection with a perfect view of the accident. That witness account, which was not obtained by police, essentially settled the case, Stoll said.

“That’s also very satisfying, when you have a situation where you add value to a case that looks like it’s a loser, and with creative thinking and tenacity and creative investigation you’re able to turn it around,”

he said. “What we’re finding with pedestrian cases is that police are only contacting one or two witnesses at the scene. But if the accident happens at any of the major intersections around town, there’s on average between four and ten 911 calls that come in now because everyone has cellphones. The 911 keeps a pretty good transcript of what was said, so now you have the phone number, you have the name of the person and you have what they said. You have these people – these witnesses – making contemporaneous observations to a 911 system that is recording it.”

Reaping the rewards

Stoll was awarded the 2009 Civil Justice Award by the San Francisco Trial Lawyers Association, given to attorneys who show integrity, grit, tenacity, ethics and great advocacy skills, and who contribute to the betterment of consumers and/or injured victims and their families. He has served on the SFTLA board since 1995 and was on the board of Consumer Attorneys of California for 14 years.

Nothing about the job however, gives him as much satisfaction as seeing his clients compensated. “The most rewarding part is handing clients a check at the end

of a case – being so thrilled that you’re able to help them,” Stoll said. “Many people come to us and think maybe it’s not going to be that hard, and then they see what you have to go through and how long it takes, and they’re usually pretty thrilled to get handed a check instead of a bill.”

When it’s time to get away from the office, Stoll spends time with his wife and three children. He coaches youth baseball, enjoys playing golf with his wife and likes to travel with his family whenever time allows.

For young lawyers seeking guidance, Stoll said his advice would depend on what their career goals are and what areas of law they plan to pursue. For those wishing to go it on their own as plaintiffs’ attorneys, he said they should develop a system for building and nurturing relationships that are going to help them grow their practice.



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But he concluded with a more simple message: “Focus on helping other people, and the rest will take care of itself.”

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