



Profile: Jesse Chrisp

Small-town lawyer succeeds through diligent studies and a passion for taking down Goliaths

BY STEPHEN ELLISON

Other professions may have suited Jesse Chrisp just fine, but a chance opportunity at mixing law with business in a community that few other attorneys focused on was one he couldn't pass up. So, he found his niche and put his heart and soul into making law his life's work in his hometown.

Chrisp grew up in Lake County, a mostly rural area in Northern California known best in recent years for its historic wildfires and flooding. But long before those disasters made national headlines, he had been providing a voice for "neighbors" experiencing personal disasters as a result of another party's negligence or gross misbehavior.

Being that voice is Chrisp's greatest source of pride these days, as he comes from the same humble background as do many of his clients. Playing David against the Goliaths of the corporate world still drives him today.

"Since I was a little kid, I have been focused on social justice," Chrisp said. "I always knew I wanted to be a lawyer. I grew up in a small town, my mother was a Jehovah's Witness, and my critical thinking was turned on by that. I was interested in local politics, I watched a lot of TV movies with lawyers in them, loved lawyers on TV. I love the idea of being able to help fight for the weaker parties, and I hate bullies."

Over the years, Chrisp has challenged wrongdoers big and small, from dog bite cases to car crashes to wrongful deaths. He has litigated hundreds of cases in Lake, Mendocino, Napa, Sonoma, Yuba, Colusa, Contra Costa, Marin and San Francisco counties and won numerous verdicts and settlements for his clients.

Not too bad for someone who in law school wasn't expecting to practice law when he graduated. Chrisp recalled



Chrisp

having no intention, as he attended Golden Gate Law School in San Francisco, of starting a career in law. He had been selling real estate to pay for college and law school and initially thought real estate would be his life pursuit. When that didn't "click" due to boredom, the young Chrisp started working for a seminar company and had decided that too was not his end game.

While he was still working for the seminar company, Chrisp got an offer that was hard to pass up and would put his law career in motion.

"I got offered a contract with the local indigent defense contractor with the county, which is basically how rural counties give public defender services," he explained. "So, for me it was a great opportunity because I got paid \$4,000 a month, and had 1,000 clients a year. I was a misdemeanor public defender, but there is no public defender's office in Lake County, so you can take all the private cases you want. So, I started adding on my business card 'personal injury lawyer.'"

Chrisp found that he loved being in court and loved learning the court system, regardless of whether it was personal injury or criminal defense, he said. He was still young at the time, about 27 or 28, and could hardly contain his excitement of being in front of a courtroom full of people.

"I finally did my first jury trial, and it was a criminal trial, a 30-day case," Chrisp said. "I defended a man wrongly accused of a sex crime. If he lost, he was going to be a registered sex offender. He had eight other lawyers before me, including five public defenders and three private lawyers he couldn't afford anymore. They would move on or become felony attorneys or move out of the area. Finally, a judge called and told me he was going to assign me the case. I took that case to trial, and after 30 days, the jury came back in 45 minutes: 12-0 not guilty. So, that was an amazing taste of what being a trial lawyer would be like. The feeling was just thrilling."

'Fighter' for the underdog

Chrisp was sold. And once he decided on a career in law, he went all in. He read all the books he could get his hands on, took training sessions, attended seminars, watched how other trial lawyers conducted themselves and spent a lot of time in court, honing his skills.

What started as a solo practice out of his home in Lake County grew into a firm with three lawyers and a staff of 10.

"One of the memorable moments was when I wrote a letter and got a check for \$15,000 – that kind of blew my 28-year-old mind," Chrisp said. "Initially, it was lucrative, and it was a way to make a living in Lake County. I tried everything. I took real estate cases, I took private criminal cases. But chasing people down for an hourly fee I just couldn't stomach. Even today – and my staff probably can't



stand it – I’m probably too nice about reducing our fee if I feel it’s just not fair.

“And that was definitely there back then,” he continued. “I would write a contract to represent someone for a DUI for \$2,000, and I’d end up waiving it after they paid the \$500 retainer. I would never chase them down for the rest – I just couldn’t do it.”

Contingency work indeed was way more in alignment with Chrisp’s beliefs and values. It was high risk, no doubt, but it was risk and reward, and it was a sure thing for clients in rural counties where no one really has the money to pay what it would cost to litigate a case, he said.

Best of all, Chrisp said, the contingency model serves as an equalizer.

“It levels the playing field against rich, massive corporations,” he said. “They get to hire a fighter who will fight for them as much as he can, and it doesn’t cost the regular people to have a fighter on their side. I really like that.”

Growing up “dirt poor” in a rural community, Chrisp had very little exposure to lawyers or the legal community. His maternal grandfather attended law school at UC Hastings College of the Law but never practiced, and Chrisp didn’t have much of a relationship with him.

But Chrisp’s childhood provided subtle influences. His father was a big fan of country music and a musician himself. As a child, Chrisp and his siblings would be invited onstage to sing in front of audiences, even once in front of 10,000 people at ARCO Arena in Sacramento, he said.

“We kind of had a musical childhood and had exposure to being on stage,” he said. “Also, the good side of being a Jehovah’s Witness is you go to everybody’s door in a suit and tie. So, I consider it great sales training, if anything.”

Drawn in

But perhaps his greatest influence occurred in undergrad college at Chico State University. A program called the Community Legal Information Center (CLIC) brought lawyers to campus to work with college students, and the

whole program was run by the students. Chrisp’s interest was piqued, and he wanted to learn more, even though he was a journalism major at the time. He got involved with CLIC and soon became director of what was basically their criminal program, he said.

“Back then, it was called Traffic and the Law because you could give information about tickets and stuff like that,” Chrisp recalled. “So, I did that and got to hang out with the lawyers. And then I was pretty convinced. One of the lawyers in particular was a well-known criminal lawyer, your classic trial lawyer’s lawyer. He wore three-piece suits, and he drove a sleek sports car, probably a Corvette. But he was cool, and he would take all the students to lunch. He was probably in his late 50s, 60s and spending his time helping college students get down the path. He made the law really fun as far as how it looked. So, I was on the path.”

During law school, Chrisp got his first taste of personal injury law through an internship, he said. He learned how to write demands and how to help a client from first walking through the door of a lawyer’s office all the way to getting a settlement from an insurance company. But he didn’t learn anything about litigation or trial and had no idea he would come to love those areas so much.

Those things he learned through his own diligence, research and tireless work ethic. Chrisp is a huge believer in the Reptile Strategy and the cognitive approach to persuading jurors. He attended a multitude of seminars that helped him learn how to build a case for his client.

“I’m a huge believer in Trial Guides, which is a website that has all the material,” he said. “I read basically every book I could get my hands on, from ‘Damages’ to ‘Rules of the Road’ to ‘Polarizing the Case.’ Those books and trainings and seminars started helping me understand what we’re really trying to accomplish and how to really build a case.

“Then, I started trying civil cases, winning some and losing others,” he continued. “Taking smaller cases to trial in

the rural courts was difficult, and we just kept going, and now we’re getting results that are very good.”

Winning at opening

Chrisp’s approach starts with case selection. He said he thrives most when there’s a significant power imbalance against his client, “the classic David and Goliath tale,” as he puts it.

If the case makes it to trial, Chrisp simply sets out to win over the jury with his opening statement. And it starts before he gets into the courtroom, with extensive research about the opposition’s experts. He scours all forms of prior depositions, digs deep on Google for all the data he can find, anything that gives his team access to what those experts have said before, in case it contradicts what they say now. He also takes video depositions, some of which can be extremely long.

“Then, I attack very hard in opening,” Chrisp explained. “I want to take away the halo effect. There’s a lot of cognitive science that goes into this approach: Basically, you don’t want their expert to get on the stand because he’s going to be a good talker, he’s going to be smooth and charming. And I don’t want their expert on the stand and have the jury see this expert for the first time the way the defense wants him seen. So, I bring the video clips at the beginning to show the jury what this guy is going to say and anything that’s good for our case and anything that puts bias on this expert.

“My last opening was over 200 slides; it took about two hours,” he added. “But by the end of it, the case was done, the jury was on our side, and the defense had nothing.”

Soak it all in

When Chrisp is not working, he enjoys traveling across the globe. He’s been to 50 countries on six continents, including Antarctica. The only one left is Australia, he said. Last year, he lived abroad because of his wife’s Swedish citizenship. “She couldn’t enter the U.S. for a year, so we had to live



abroad for a while, which was a little tough for both of us," he said.

In the area of advising his younger colleagues, Chrisp emphasized networking and gaining as much experience as possible as soon as possible.

"There's a path out there, and everyone's is different," he said. "Try to make contact with older, experienced lawyers. Go watch them, ask them questions. The

plaintiffs' lawyers bar is unique in that we always share. Good artists copy; great artists steal. And we're all thieves of the best material. The nice thing is it's freely accepted and encouraged.

"Lastly, I've learned a ton from losing," Chrisp continued. "That which hurts worst teaches best. Don't be afraid to lose because that's inevitable. I've learned more from losing and became a

better trial lawyer from learning what went wrong with a case or where I went wrong in a case than I have in winning."

Stephen Ellison is a freelance writer based in San Jose. Contact him at ssjellison@aol.com.

