



Profile: Steven Kronenberg

Beer maker or difference maker: Catastrophic-injury attorney makes the right choice

BY STEPHEN ELLISON

Law may have played second fiddle when a young Steven Kronenberg was considering a career, but from the day he made the pivotal decision to enter law school over pursuing his talent as a beer maker, he's had no regrets.

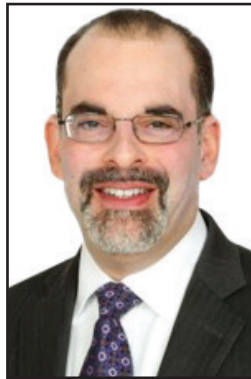
Kronenberg, a partner with the Veen Firm who mostly handles catastrophic injury cases, initially had designs on going to medical school because he loved science and had quite a knack for it. So, of course, he began college taking the applied sciences coursework, and made it through physics and organic chemistry but then just lost interest. He subsequently changed his major to psychology and started learning how to make beer.

"I took a couple years off after graduating, just worked and decided that I was really at a crossroads," Kronenberg recalled. "I was either going to get a graduate degree in fermentation science or law school. And I was really good at making beer. I had investors lined up because I was making great beer.

"This brings me back to a conversation I had with my father," he continued. "I'll never forget him saying, 'You know, Steven, there will be time for beer after law school.' And that's sort of a shorthand way of saying you really can't support a family making beer."

Kronenberg says he had been fighting off law school for a lot of years and decided to take the plunge. When he graduated from law school, he moved to the Bay Area to study for the bar exam and look for work. He had no job lined up and just crossed his fingers that he would find a way to make it happen, he said.

Kronenberg landed a job assisting with death penalty appeals, and since he originally wanted to pursue a career in



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criminal defense, it seemed like a practical way to gain some experience, he said.

"I basically was open to any job opportunity that would pay the bills and was lucky enough to land the position working with a solo practitioner who was working on death penalty appeals," he said. "And that was great experience for about a year while I tried to get into something that would have more opportunities for advancement, and perhaps pay more than a public interest kind of position."

It was post-9/11 at that point, and Kronenberg explains, "My position that I was working was not really financially viable with student loans and everything else. So, I got a job as staff counsel on the defense side because at that time, I really needed a job, and it worked out great because I developed experience in litigation and trials. And that sort of sent me off to working in in the civil arena."

Before changing sides, Kronenberg first transitioned from criminal defense to civil defense, where he represented insurance companies in catastrophic-injury cases as well as product liability and food-safety-compliance cases.

Over time, he became quite good at defending corporations and their insurance carriers, until he finally grew weary of seeing plaintiffs who were suffering even further when their attorneys weren't getting them justice. He no longer could feel great about winning on behalf of insurance companies.

"I was out-lawyering some skilled attorneys on the plaintiff side," he recalled. "But I didn't feel really good about that. I mean, there were some cases where I think that the plaintiff may have been better served if I had been representing them."

Joining a great plaintiff firm

So, the stars aligned, Kronenberg said, and he was able to get a position at one of the top plaintiff firms in the country – the Veen firm – where he's been for the past 11 years. During that span, he's been a valuable and versatile contributor for the plaintiff bar: His science and food background have made him an authority in food processing, distributing and safety law; he served on the board of the Consumer Attorneys of California, Northern District; and he was a member of the California Employment Lawyers Association.

Looking back, he says he has no regrets about leaving his beer-making skills untapped.

"I still enjoy alcohol in moderation, but especially now that I have two adolescents, I don't want my professional life to revolve around drinking," Kronenberg said. "And I am proud of my work helping catastrophically injured people, especially difficult cases that other firms rejected."

Music City transplant

Kronenberg was raised in Nashville, Tennessee, where during high school he was a member of the debate team and participated in mock trial. One of his close friends back then suggested he consider becoming a lawyer, even though he also was focusing much of his studies on science classes.

He traveled north for college, studying psychology at University of Pennsylvania and stayed in that general



area – after setting aside his brewmaster talents – for law school at Temple University.

Entering criminal defense out of the gate was the plan. He soon moved on to being a civil defense lawyer, but when he decided to make the transition to the plaintiff bar he found it was much more collegial; that there's a more concerted effort to try to help other lawyers, whether they're colleagues in-house or from other firms.

"I learned more from Bill Veen sitting down with him for an hour in the summer of 2013 than I knew in the entire decade plus of my practice with other people," Kronenberg said. "That was something that really resonated and continues to resonate with me. I've really tried to do this for long enough so that I'm able to help less-experienced attorneys, whether it's at my firm or elsewhere. People who just have questions; I always try to make myself available. If there's something I've done that maybe they might need some help with, I'm happy to talk with them about it or share my work with them."

The other part of the transition that may have caught Kronenberg off guard just a bit is the difference in the workload. To be sure, the work is not something he minds – but it seemed a little odd to him when he considered the billable hours he compiled as a stellar defense lawyer versus the long hours of work and focus and grit it takes to succeed in the plaintiffs' law arena.

"I don't want to say I fell into it because I love the plaintiffs' practice," he said. ... "With the caveat that it's an incredible amount of work. When I was on the defense side, I would routinely bill something like 2,400 hours as one of the top lawyers at my (defense) firm. And I'm working harder now than I ever did then."

Empathetic mind

A good part of his motivation, he says, comes from helping human beings

REDIRECT:

Getaway Spot: Fort Bragg, CA for peaceful and quiet family vacations.

Go-To Music or Artist: Thelonious Monk while relaxing with Mrs. Kronenberg; early Misfits during breaks from trial prep.

Recommended Reading: Food writer Kenji Lopez-Alt.

Dream Job: Running a farmers' market stand selling pizza and baked goods.

Words to Live By: "Pay it forward."

suffering from life-altering incidents, people whose loved ones lost their lives in an incident that likely was preventable, or a person whose career ended because of a catastrophic brain or spinal injury.

As someone who came very close to death himself, Kronenberg has plenty of sympathy and drive to work on behalf of those people. He says it comes down to doing the right thing.

"I have a real empathy that I've developed with my clients as someone who's been through what our clients have," he explained. "In 2018, about five years into my plaintiffs' practice, I got really sick. I almost died. My doctors told me I was literally like 12 hours from death. I spent over a week in the ICU, wearing masks and in surgery. It took me months to recover. My kids at the time were 5 and 7, and it just traumatized them, frankly, and imposed serious burdens on my wife.

"That at least gave me a window into what our clients go through with their injuries, treatment and recovery and how it affects the family," Kronenberg said. "It really opened my eyes. It was a horrible experience that I think about frequently when I'm dealing with my clients."

So, without requiring any extra motivation, Kronenberg's approach becomes a key to success in a case, whether it's in trial or the case settles or resolves another way. Like many of his peers, he prepares every case as if it's headed for trial, and oftentimes his diligence in finding an obscure fact or

document or record becomes the difference maker.

One example he shared was a case in which he represented a worker who suffered "horrific" injuries at his job site after he fell through a metal catwalk that was rusted. It was first a worker's compensation case, but there also was a potential third-party case. A third-party company was brought in before the injury incident to conduct inspections at the site. That company testified at deposition, under oath, that it never looks for rust during its inspections, saying it's outside of what they do.

Kronenberg made a Public Records Act request for every similar public facility in the state to obtain records on that third-party firm.

"I combed through thousands and thousands of pages of inspection reports, and lo and behold, I found someone who inspected for rust," he said. "So, if you find yourself looking for needles in a haystack, and you look hard enough, you can find them."

Hard work, then dinner

When he's not working, Kronenberg enjoys spending time with his family. He loves to cook and says he makes dinner for the family six or seven nights a week.

One silver lining that came from COVID, he said, is now he can often work remotely. He's getting more sleep, he's not concerned with the harrowing Bay Area commute and it all brings the work-life balance a little closer to reality for him.

"I remember on the defense side, an attorney handed me an article – the title was something to the effect of: 'Work-life balance? Try another profession.' And that's kind of sad but true because I am personally invested in my clients, in my cases. It's difficult to balance that I'm a family man, just trying to be a good person, good husband, good dad. And it's a big challenge."

As for advice he would offer the younger generation of lawyers, Kronenberg



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said it may sound trite, but it's true there is no substitute for hard work, especially in the early years of your career.

"There are no shortcuts to success," he said. "Look at people who are success-

ful later in their careers. The old joke is, you know, it only took 20 years to become an overnight success. There's a lot of work, and it's a long road. So, if you put in the work, you'll get the results."

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