

ED WALSH

Compassionate and Dedicated Advocate for Injured Plaintiffs

by Lauren P. Duncan

WHEATON—When accomplished plaintiff’s trial lawyer Edward J. Walsh and his wife, Bobbi, went about building a new farmhouse in the Upper Mississippi River Valley of southeast Minnesota, he pored over every detail of the developing property while keeping an eye toward designing it to be as sustainable as possible.

The founding member of Walsh, Knippen & Cetina, Chartered, based in Wheaton, has a 355-acre bluff land farm in Minnesota. One of the property’s many unique characteristics is that it’s solar-powered. The Walshes give back to the local power company about half of the power the solar array generates so others may use it.

What’s that got to do with Ed Walsh’s legal career, you may ask?

The amount of careful thought and years of research, dedication and commitment Walsh put into his Green Home Institute gold-certified farmhouse—preserving what he can of this world to make it a better place for others—parallels something else.

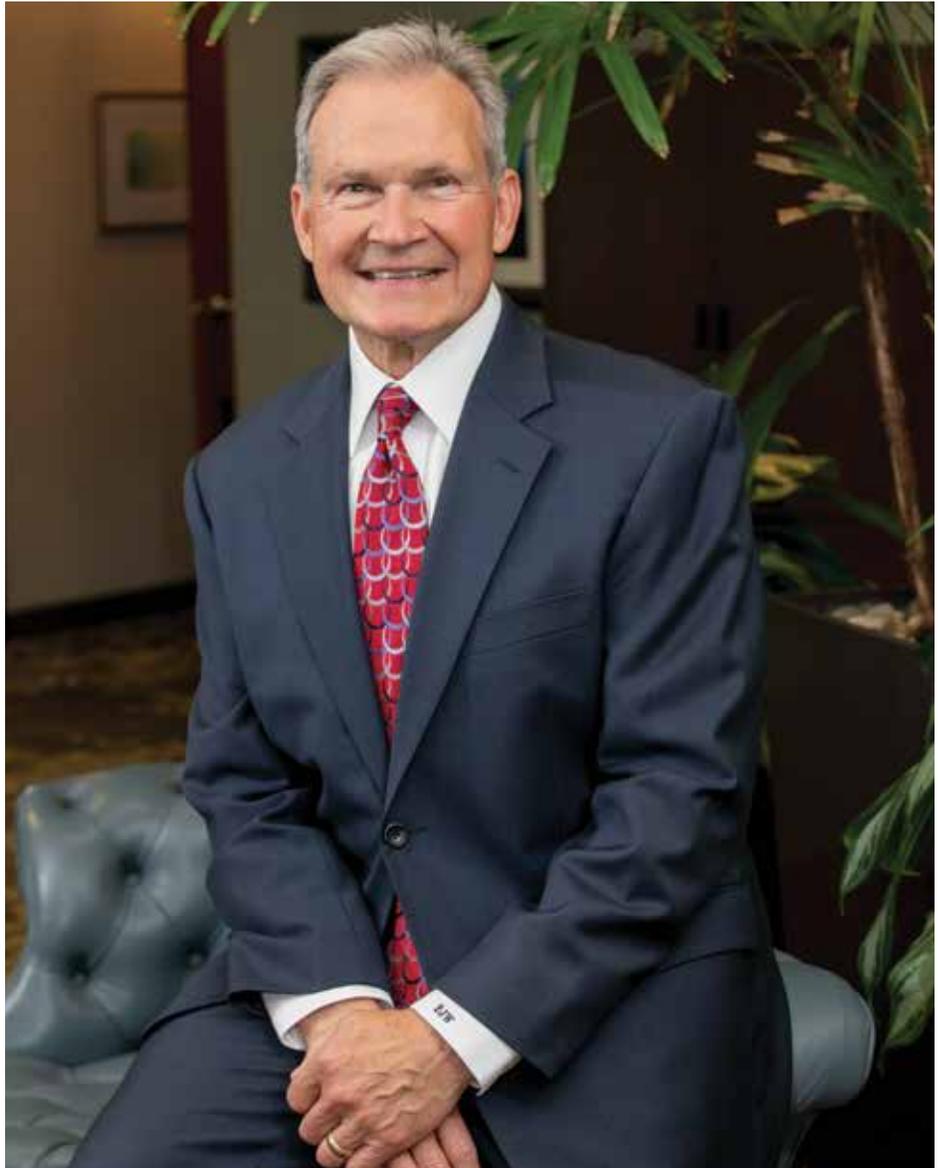
Like Walsh’s sustainable farmhouse, his legal reputation has been built on compassion, dedication and careful articulation.

“He’s very conscious about the environment and how we should be trying to protect it, just like he’s conscious about people who get hurt. He wants to protect them,” says David F. Rolewick, a founding attorney with Rolewick & Gutski, P.C. and a longtime colleague and friend of Walsh.

STARTING OUT STRONG

As a boy, Walsh didn’t know he’d go on to be an award-winning plaintiff’s attorney with a longstanding practice in DuPage County. As a child, however, he took an avid interest in athletics that helped him sharpen some of the skills needed to thrive as a trial lawyer.

Walsh grew up in the Edison Park neighborhood on the northwest side of Chicago, where he attended St. Juliana School. While he wasn’t particularly focused on academics as a kid, Walsh says it was simply an accepted fact in his family that he would be the first person of his extended family to



attend college.

At the same time, Walsh was also athletically driven. He played football and baseball early on; as a teenager and college student, he continued with football and he wrestled.

“The competitive aspect of athletics transferred over into the area of law I ultimately concentrated in,” Walsh says. “Trial practice is extremely competitive and requires commitment, dedication and a lot of personal perseverance.

“I think athletic competition has many lessons that can be instructive in life. One of the most important is that when you lose, you have to just pick yourself up, dust yourself off, move on to the next game, or professionally, to your next client or trial,” he says.

Although at this point in Walsh’s life he had no inkling he’d one day become a lawyer, he did have a memorable encounter that planted a seed in his mind. Work in the legal profession could lead to a different type of life than the blue-collar one he was raised knowing.

When Walsh was in 8th grade, he worked as a caddy at the Park Ridge Country Club and met a friend who introduced Walsh to his father, a Chicago plaintiff’s lawyer. Walsh was captivated by his demeanor and professionalism.

“It didn’t at that point become the driving force in my life. But it was a recognition that education, and then a career in the law, might be a pathway to a better quality of life for me as a person and, if I ever had a family, for them also,” Walsh says.

“As that experience was added with other experiences, it just became clear to me that pursuing a career in the law would have many rewards. The most important reward I realized early in my career is that we can help people, especially those people who are downtrodden, the underdogs, and at least try to get them a fair shake. We’re not always going to be successful. However, if we do the best we can, and always focus on our clients’ needs, the economic rewards will generally follow.”

When Walsh went off to college, he still wasn't certain he'd pursue a career in law. But he did begin to focus more on academics, a shift he attributes to a few "wonderful professors" who helped him rearrange priorities, become educated and develop critical thinking skills.

Walsh attended Coe College in Cedar Rapids, Iowa, where he studied liberal arts and majored in history. Later in college when Walsh was weighing whether to pursue a graduate program in history or law school, a history professor who mentored Walsh was quick to encourage him to go to law school.

Another mentor who came into Walsh's life before law school was his father-in-law, the late Robert E. Covert. Walsh met his daughter, Bobbi, at Coe College and they married while there.

Covert, who was an attorney and the vice president of Chicago Title & Trust Company's DuPage County office, was highly respected in the DuPage County and greater Chicago legal community. This connection proved to be a helpful one to a young, aspiring Walsh.

Walsh describes his late father-in-law as "a prince of a man," who generously introduced Walsh to the movers and shakers in DuPage County.

"Everybody loved him. Probably for the first 10 years of my practice, somewhere along in my explanation, if I met a new lawyer, I made sure they knew I was Bob Covert's son-in-law. Once that happened, all doors opened."

BURGEONING TRIAL LAWYER

Walsh went on to complete his legal education at Loyola University Chicago School of Law, during which time he also clerked at the Chicago firm of Carey, Filter, White & Boland.

After graduating Loyola in 1973, he clerked for Second District Appellate Court Justice William L. Guild for two years before joining a general practice firm in Naperville. Walsh became the go-to attorney for personal injury cases there.

In the 18 months Walsh was at the Naperville firm, he encountered numerous insurance defense lawyers. In 1976, renown trial lawyer Roger K. O'Reilly called Walsh up and offered him a position at his DuPage County law firm.

Walsh says it was an exciting time to be both in the legal profession and an associate at O'Reilly's firm in the late 70s. The dynamics of the firm and within the profession were "very collegial, extremely professional, cordial, almost non-combative," he says.

O'Reilly exuded those qualities, Walsh says. He was known for mentoring the younger associates in his firm even though it likely cost him money to have them shadow him in court or sit in on depositions.

Walsh recalls O'Reilly coming into the office one day. It was Walsh's second week at the firm, but O'Reilly invited Walsh to come along with him to a products liability jury trial involving their young, severely injured client.

"It was just a fantastic experience. It was like throwing a can of gas on a small fire. I became absolutely committed to being a plaintiff's lawyer at that point in time," Walsh says.

BREAKING OUT ON HIS OWN

After working for O'Reilly's firm for two years, Walsh took the brave step of starting his own practice. He initially launched a firm with another lawyer. After several years, Walsh's plaintiff medical malpractice work grew, and the lawyers realized their practices conflicted. So, they mutually agreed to part ways.

A few years after he started his own firm, in 1986, Walsh received a referral of an extremely complex medical malpractice products liability case. After five years of work on the case, it became a record-setting Illinois verdict. His young client suffered brain damage and hemiplegia due to a defective ventilator and a negligent neonatologist.

Walsh worked the Cook County case up on his own, taking more than 75 depositions all over the United States. Many times, he questioned whether he was experienced enough to properly handle the case, which was being defended by three of the largest insurance defense firms in Chicago.

It turns out, he was. After six weeks of trial, with the assistance of his senior associate, Jim Knippen, the jury returned a verdict of more than \$10 million.

"It was an extremely personally and professionally challenging experience, but certainly a huge growth experience for me. It was a career enhancing and changing experience," he says.

Walsh, who owned an office building in Wheaton for 30 years, decided he didn't want to expand the firm because he wanted to stay

in their historic building. Remaining there forced Walsh's firm to remain relatively small, and it essentially has forced the firm's attorneys to remain extremely selective in the cases they accept. This has enabled the attorneys to focus on handling quality cases rather than a high volume of work.

Of course, Walsh has gone on to win numerous other significant settlements and verdicts over his more than four decades in practice. In one case, Walsh helped his client secure a \$7 million medical malpractice verdict, which was also an Illinois record in the facial disfigurement category.

That was the only case in which the jury awarded Walsh twice what he asked for. He credits that result to his "wonderful client."

"She is as sweet and wonderful of a person as you'd even want to know, let alone represent. The jury, I just know, thought the world of her and thought she deserved full, fair compensation, which was more than I suggested they give her," he says.

No matter the dollar figures at stake in a case, Walsh points out that he's long held the position that he should always focus on his clients' well-being and best interests.

Walsh recalls the advice one of his mentors gave him early in his career, a saying Walsh carries with him even today.

"Don't ever think about the fee or the money first," Walsh says. "You think about providing the absolute best legal representation you can for your clients and keep their needs and best interests as your top priority. You always conduct yourself in a professional and highly ethical manner, and if those are your priorities, the economic benefits for your client and you will generally follow."

"You can't turn the calendar back and have clients be healthy again, but you get great pride, joy and satisfaction out of doing the very best you can to give them some hope, some dignity and some quality of life. And that's what allows you to keep going and keep



Walsh and wife Bobbi pose with their grandchildren.



The family photo taken at the wedding of Walsh's son, Michael.

persevering," Walsh adds.

These philosophies and commitments recently allowed Walsh, along with his partner, to secure an \$18.6 million settlement in a Chicago construction site case for their brain damaged client and his family.

Over the 38 years Walsh has headed up his firm, he's established a reputation within the legal profession as a meticulous and hard-working attorney. Perhaps some of that is due to his blue-collar beginnings. Perhaps it's partly due to his background in athletics. No matter what the early influences were, working hard is built into his character, say some of Walsh's colleagues.

A WIDELY ADMIRER COLLEAGUE

John Grotto of the Law Offices of John J. Grotto in Wheaton has known Walsh for 40 years and has long considered Walsh to be a mentor.

A few of the qualities Grotto admires most about Walsh center around the fact that Walsh is, simply put, a nice person.

"I have never seen him engage in what I refer to as the 'cutthroat' practice of law. In all the years I have known him, I have never seen him lose his temper. He is soft spoken and has always been ready to take time from his very busy schedule to explain things, provide guidance and lend a helping hand. He does so willingly and without any expectation of something in return," Grotto says.

"Despite the fact that Ed is soft spoken, he is not a pushover," Grotto adds. "Ed has a good balance in that he knows when the situation requires him to be firm."

David F. Rolewick has known Walsh since law school at Loyola. The two went on to work together at the O'Reilly firm, and they've both been practicing law in Wheaton ever since.

Rolewick and Walsh previously served as members of the Illinois Supreme Court

Commission on Professionalism.

"He is a very civil, polite gentleman," Rolewick says. "Always dedicated to his clients, dedicated to improving society. He's always prepared, over-prepared, and he's very articulate in expressing himself, which of course is very valuable to a jury. He is an inspiration to a lot of lawyers."

Former Chief Judge of the 18th Judicial Circuit Court Stephen J. Culliton has known Walsh for 44 years. Culliton also highlights Walsh's commitment to civility, both in his personal and professional life, as one reason why Culliton has "tremendous respect" for Walsh.

"One thing that leaps out at everybody who knows him is that he's a gentleman. He's so ethical that the idea something could go amok with him would never even cross your mind, nor would the idea that he was not being absolutely upfront with you on everything. It's a pleasure to work with him and to have him in front of you as a litigant."

Culliton adds that Walsh is dedicated to preparation in his law practice.

"He's been in front of me many times," says Culliton. "What strikes you first about him is how incredibly well prepared he is, always. I don't care how good a lawyer you are, if somebody outworks you, they're going to outdo you. Nobody outworks Ed."

ADMIRING HIS COUNTLESS ATTRIBUTES

Clients echo some of the remarks of Walsh's colleagues about his integrity as a legal advocate.

Sharen Kordik, Walsh's client since 2010, points to his caring demeanor toward clients and his commitment to ethics as among the reasons she is pleased he represented her.

"There are so many attributes, but to name a few, his integrity, his honesty and his quest to find the truth and accuracy in the cases he selects to pursue," she says.

"He is diligent and hardworking, seeking

out the facts under situations that can be very complicated, demanding and even controversial.

"Of course, all these qualities contributed to his success. He also demands the best, is still compassionate, his investigational skills are excellent, and his general, calm demeanor makes Ed the best of the best," Kordik adds.

Walsh is also licensed to practice law in Minnesota. Another client of his ended up working with him on a matter that had nothing to do with medical malpractice whatsoever. Theresa Pierce got to know Walsh when he would occasionally come into a rural southeast Minnesota golf course clubhouse she managed for breakfast.

Pierce, a single mother of two, experienced issues involving harassment and bullying at work. It led her to consider leaving her job and working multiple other jobs to get out of the situation she was in.

Walsh noticed her situation and first met with her to offer advice. He then realized he could do more to help her and instead took on her employment case pro bono, even though the matter was beyond his usual practice. Walsh successfully negotiated a substantial financial severance for her and a favorable letter of recommendation from her municipal employer.

"To have such a brilliant, successful attorney do something this amazing for someone like me, well, there are no words," she says. "I will always be eternally grateful that God crossed our paths. Such an honest, humble, caring soul who truly puts his heart in what he believes in, justice. I am honored to now call such an amazing man my friend."

In addition to his practice, Walsh has served on a long list of boards, commissions and committees, including leadership roles at the Illinois Trial Lawyers Association, the Illinois Supreme Court Committee on Character and Fitness, the Illinois Supreme Court Commission on Professionalism, the Illinois Supreme Court Rules Committee, the American Association for Justice and numerous other bar associations.

Among the highest awards he's been bestowed are the 2016 Plaintiff Trial Lawyer Excellence Lifetime Achievement Award by Law Bulletin Media and the *Jury Verdict Reporter*. This award is bestowed upon only one Illinois plaintiff's attorney each year.

Walsh has long maintained a commitment to finding a work-life balance. He and his wife Bobbi have four sons and five grandchildren.

He enjoys wilderness backpacking, fly-fishing, horsemanship, endurance training, reforestation, and native plant and prairie restoration at his Minnesota farm. Because he is an advocate for environmental sustainability, Walsh has represented not-for-profit environmental organizations as pro bono clients in southeast Minnesota. ■