



# Profile: Jack DeMeo

## *Courtesy and generosity have molded the so-called “dean” of trial lawyers in Sonoma County*

BY STEPHEN ELLISON

Wine Country has its share of charms, and John F. “Jack” DeMeo certainly should be counted among them. Known as the veritable “dean” of Sonoma County trial lawyers, the principal of DeMeo, DeMeo and West in Santa Rosa has been practicing law for 52 years and shows few signs of slowing down.

For someone who as a youth initially resisted law as a profession, the longevity in itself is quite an accomplishment. But DeMeo’s story goes far beyond durability and staying power. His is a tale of hard-earned respect, dogged determination and an unflinching generosity that few other attorneys — or persons, for that matter — have been able to match.

“Life is so much simpler when you’re working with or against Jack. That’s what I like most about him,” said Bart Weitzenberg, of Abbey, Weitzenberg, Warren and Emery, a Santa Rosa-based firm. “There isn’t anybody who doesn’t respect Jack, and there isn’t anybody who wouldn’t put him on their short list of great trial lawyers. Obviously, he brings a lot of skills to the table, but his integrity is what impresses people most.”

To hear Weitzenberg tell it, DeMeo already was the “preeminent trial lawyer in Sonoma County” in 1974, the year Weitzenberg arrived in Santa Rosa. That year, the two were on opposite sides of a case. Young Weitzenberg’s boss told him to subpoena DeMeo for documents related to the case, and Weitzenberg decided to place a courtesy call ahead of the order. “I remember it was a Friday, and I called him, and Jack says to me, ‘What are you doing tomorrow morning?’ I told him I’d be at home,” Weitzenberg recalled.



DeMeo

“He showed up at my house the next morning with all the documents, and he helped me go through them.

“That’s just the kind of guy he is,” Weitzenberg continued. “Every-one in the county knows, if you have a problem, always

call Jack. And he’ll take as much time as needed to help you out.”

### Staying home

Time is one of the reasons DeMeo at first rejected the idea of following his father’s path into law. For 61 years, the senior DeMeo seemingly devoted all hours of the day to the family business. “I saw that my father never had any time to do anything but practice law,” DeMeo said. “He was a hard-working guy. He started working during the Great Depression and just got into that frame of mind that he needed to keep at it in order to survive.

“I remember my dad going to one of my ballgames when I was in high school,” DeMeo continued. “I think I remember it so well because it was probably the only one he ever went to.”

Born and raised in Santa Rosa, DeMeo attended Santa Rosa Junior College before transferring to the University of San Francisco and then Hastings College of the Law. Upon earning his law degree and being admitted to the bar at age 24, he returned to Santa Rosa and began practicing with his father. “I didn’t think I wanted to be a lawyer,” he said, “but once I got into it and did it for a while, it just started clicking.”

In those days, all lawyers were general practitioners, covering virtually all aspects of the law, from plaintiffs to defense to contested divorce and other areas of civil litigation. “I did everything,” DeMeo said, “and then kind of settled into an area that I enjoyed more than the other stuff.”

Fifty-two years and dozens of successful cases later, it’s safe to say DeMeo chose the correct path and carved it the right way. His influence is felt far beyond the office and courtroom walls and even stretches outside the bounds of Northern California. For instance, he is the only attorney from Sonoma County and one of few plaintiffs’ lawyers to serve as the California chapter president for the American Board of Trial Advocates, according to Weitzenberg. He is a former faculty member of the Hastings Center for Trial and Appellate Advocacy and has lectured frequently for the Continuing Education of the Bar. And he co-authored California Deposition and Discovery Practice (Matthew Bender & Co), which many consider the leading textbook on discovery.

### Wide range of cases

Like most trial lawyers, DeMeo harps on diligent preparation and believes that it doesn’t hurt to be a straight shooter. Donald Wild of San Francisco-based Wild, Carey and Fife, got a firsthand account of DeMeo’s approach as opposing counsel in a wrongful death case. “Jack was very thorough,” Wild said, “and he had a good case.”

DeMeo represented the surviving widow and five surviving children of a woman who had been struck by a large truck as her car sat in stopped traffic. The defense claimed the driver had a medical emergency and passed out at the wheel. But DeMeo was able to prove that the man had prior knowledge of his condition. He



got a favorable judgment against the doctors and the trucking company, the details of which are confidential, DeMeo said.

“He was competent, professional and really easy to work with,” Wild said. “And I found out that when Jack tells you something, you can take it to the bank.”

Another case DeMeo is proud of, involved a woman whose comatose son was issued a traffic citation and an order to appear in court. The son’s vehicle had hit a spot of standing water on a highway and hydroplaned into oncoming traffic. DeMeo discovered that the standing water had been a regular occurrence on that particular section of the road due to a new drainage system being built nearby – the water had been temporarily diverted and collected in one area of the highway. DeMeo settled for \$1.4 million with the state and the contractor.

“Personally, it was very satisfying to do something like that for that family,” he said.

DeMeo also used to handle suits against bars and other establishments that would “over-supply” alcohol to patrons who then got into their vehicles and proceeded to injure or kill themselves in

crashes. Today, the law has been changed and does not hold bars accountable for over-supplying.

Finally, DeMeo represents several jockeys, whether it be for injuries sustained during races or training, or as counsel for the Horseman’s Association in cases against racetracks.

“I’m heavy into horses. I raise, breed and sell them, mostly in California,” he said. “I’ve been doing it since I was 19. I remember it started when someone was sending a horse to the slaughterhouse, and I said, “Don’t do that!”

#### **Retirement on hold**

When he’s not in court or the office or checking on his equine interests, DeMeo may be tending to the family vineyard or traveling abroad. And those so-called outside interests will remain such for the time being, as he has no immediate plans to retire. “I’ve been thinking about it for 20 years,” he said. “I’d like to keep the practice in the family. Right now, I have a granddaughter in her second year of law school. My son was just promoted to the bench, so he’s out of the running.”

Something he’s always taken very seriously is his devotion to community interests, especially charity organizations. He serves on the board of directors for the Valley of the Moon Children’s Foundation and encourages all firm employees to be come involved. “We just helped build a new home up here for the children’s foster care program,” he said.

DeMeo’s generosity is rarely, if ever, put on hold, whether it’s for a family member, friend, community interest or a colleague. “Some days when I’m in a difficult situation, I’ll call Jack for advice,” Weitzenberg said, “and he always makes the time.”

For the next generation of lawyers, DeMeo offers this advice: “Work hard, be honest, be courteous and professional. Because if you don’t do all those things, it’s going to get around and do harm to your business. That doesn’t mean don’t be aggressive – just be polite about it.”

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