



Profile: Jude Basile

Nationally recognized trial lawyer stands up against corporate greed and government bullies

BY STEPHEN ELLISON

Nothing gives Jude Basile more satisfaction than finding the truth and using it to conquer greed and abuse of power. It's been a mission of his since childhood, long before he became an acclaimed trial lawyer, to challenge those who unethically – and in many instances, unlawfully – exploit their positions of authority.

As a youngster growing up in a small, blue-collar town in western Pennsylvania, Basile experienced firsthand accounts of such abuse. To this day, one incident in particular involving his father's business and a certain teen employee serves as the driving force behind Basile's pursuits.

"My dad's bar got shut down for me being underage and working there. I'd help him out on Friday nights making pizzas in the kitchen; I was 14," Basile recalled. "The liquor board came in and shut us down for a month for me working there and for having gambling devices that were actually 50-50 church raffle tickets in the bar. And my dad couldn't do anything about it.

"So that kind of pissed me off ... at the power of government," Basile added. "And more so, we didn't have a lot of money. My dad couldn't afford a lawyer to fight it, so we just shut down – and needless to say, raising a family with six kids and selling 10-cent beers and 30-cent sandwiches, being shut down for a month hurt."

Seeing his struggling family knocked down so callously would have been motivation enough, but another incident put Basile over the top. While he was in college, a close friend of his was killed in a crash involving a big rig that swerved to the shoulder of the road. "And the trucking company kind of took advantage of



Basile

the family, it was my understanding, by just giving them a pittance for the funeral expenses," he said.

"So those things sent me off on the road to wanting to be a lawyer," he explained, "to

stand up for people that are taken advantage of by more powerful groups like the government and corporations. Those are the things that motivated me and formed the foundation of who I am today."

Today, the principal of the Basile Law Firm of San Luis Obispo can reflect back on 30 years in law with a hint of pride in knowing that he succeeded on many levels:

- Become an attorney to stand up for people taken advantage of by higher powers? Check.
- Become a trial lawyer to challenge and defeat those greedy power abusers in court and make sure wrongdoers are punished? Check.
- Start and grow his own practice? Check.
- Mold that practice so that it is successful without being the control center of his life? Check.

Much of that last achievement he attributes to his time and work with Gerry Spence and the Trial Lawyers College, of which he is now president. Spence is a very well-rounded person, Basile said, and it has rubbed off. "I've tailored my practice to be a whole person as best as I can," Basile said. "I drive my kids to school. I'm barbecuing ribs for my family tonight for dinner. But I'm also handling

the cases I do. I've tried to be very well-rounded in developing as a person, like Gerry. I think the best trial lawyers can do that.

"When we get stuck in a rut of just being a lawyer, an analytical dissector of cold, hard facts, I think we lose the humanity of connecting with people," he continued. "When I hear lawyers talking about all the cases they're trying and all the money they're making, it seems to be a chase for more and more. I have something I think none of them has, and that is enough."

Humble beginnings

As one of six children growing up among coal miners and steel workers, Basile was not "a product of privilege," as he phrased it. But as much as the young Basile admired those tough, hardworking men, his father wanted much more for him. Translation: He would get a college education.

Basile excelled in team sports, especially as a quarterback in football, and was recruited and went to Notre Dame University. The grand arena of South Bend was perhaps a dream realized at first, but it proved to be too grand for the small-town kid. So after a year at Notre Dame, he transferred back to Division II Edinboro University in his home state, where he set records, led the team to an undefeated season and was inducted into the school's hall of fame.

Any thoughts of being the next Joe Montana, however, faded quickly. So Basile turned to his backup plan: becoming an all-pro in the courtroom. The training had already begun at Edinboro, where he would catch a ride home from a woman who worked at the courthouse. While waiting for her, he would take the opportunity to sit in on some of the



proceedings, giving himself, in effect, a real-life introduction to trial law.

“I sat and watched these trials, and I saw a lot of jurors in there who looked like people who came into my dad’s bar,” Basile recalled. “People who could make decisions and right wrongs and do what was right. And I thought, wow, look at this thing that’s going on with ordinary people having such power.”

After earning a master’s degree in business at Indiana University of Pennsylvania, Basile headed west to attend Thomas Jefferson School of Law in San Diego, where he continued those real-life studies at a nearby courthouse. He watched a lot of the “local stars” – including San Francisco’s Melvin Belli – try cases and decided that’s what he wanted to do. So he started “harassing” the city attorney because he knew it would give him the best chance to immediately start trying cases. His persistence worked.

“They hired me, and I probably did 35 to 50 jury trials on criminal misdemeanors in about 18 months,” he said. “I did that to really get my feet wet.”

From there, Basile took a job as a prosecutor with the district attorney’s office in Santa Barbara, where again the trial experience far outweighed any other aspect of the job, he said. After a year there, he dropped everything and took a solo tour of Europe, and when he returned in 1985, with only about \$300 to his name, he decided to open his own practice in San Diego.

Quality over quantity

Basile takes great pride not in the number of cases and monetary awards

he’s achieved, but in the significance of the select few cases he works on each year – in terms of the benefit to his client and to society in general.

For the past eight to 10 years, his caseload has consisted of five or fewer cases, enabling him to forge a deep connection with each client. “The majority of my cases are ones where I’m brought in to be lead counsel and share my approach to trial practice,” Basile explained. “I typically show the referring lawyer my approach while he learns. My philosophy is to spend a lot of time with the client to best understand their case.”

Basile’s rapport with clients has been the key to his successes in trial – that and the method he’s helped develop at Trial Lawyers College. He explains it as a fluid form of self-discovery rather than a conventional, step-by-step process.

“It’s unique in that we believe everybody has within themselves the ability to be a trial lawyer if they first take the time to discover who they are,” said Basile, who has been TLC’s president for four years. “It’s not like us laying on you what we think you should do. It’s a method of bringing it out of the person. It’s fascinating, and it’s helped people in many aspects of their lives, not just being a trial lawyer.”

In addition to his leadership role at TLC, Basile has received regional and national recognition from his peers. He was recently inducted into the Inner Circle of Advocates, one of the most coveted national honors in the law profession. And he has been selected three times (2004, 2008, 2010) as Trial Lawyer of the Year by the Central Coast Trial Lawyers Association.

During his off hours, Basile enjoys spending time with his three children – one son and two daughters – and takes a daily hike through the woods behind his home in Cambria. He also loves to cook for his family and recently took up yoga.

As for the future, Basile said he hopes to keep on talking to juries until he can’t talk any more. “I love the power and dynamic of talking to real people and asking them and sharing with them and showing them how they can do what’s right,” he said. “I think that’s the big key – asking people to do what’s right and showing them how to do it.”

When it comes to guidance for prospective trial lawyers, Basile urges them to be honest with themselves about why they’ve chosen to pursue the field. If the answer keeps coming back to money and other material reasons, he advises them to consider another profession. “We should be doing what we want, not just chasing material things for the sake of keeping score,” he said.

In other words, being true to yourself is most important, no matter what you’re doing. “Find the truth,” Basile said, “and you can’t go wrong.”



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