Profile: Roger Dreyer

Answering a “calling,” a top trial lawyer continues to make the biggest impact he can

BY STEPHEN ELLISON

If people truly are predestined for a livelihood – what our society often refers to as a “calling” – Roger Dreyer may be the supreme model for his profession.

The principal of Dreyer Babich Buccola of Sacramento was raised in a military family that traveled extensively throughout the country and overseas, and that state of “normal” enabled a young Dreyer to develop a unique ability to connect with people – a trait he has used almost daily through the years as one of the top trial lawyers in California.

“I think it allowed me to be very resilient, resourceful, to think on my feet and develop relationships quickly,” Dreyer said of his itinerant childhood. “I have a pretty honed capacity for sizing people up, and that helps me in jury selection. I’ve had to learn how to read people in certain situations pretty quickly. It’s certainly helped me in everything I’ve done.”

It also helped growing up during the 1960s and ’70s, an era when lawyers were at the forefront of social change in America. Dreyer, like many youth at the time, idolized these champions of civil reform and set out to emulate their power.

“A different thing. You’re representing individuals; you live and die with your clients that have had something catastrophic happen to them,” he explained. “If as the DA I was unsuccessful in my prosecution, the consequences were more personal – well, you lost; you know somebody gets off, so to speak. But there’s nowhere near the sense of accountability as that of a plaintiffs’ lawyer, for me.

When you take seriously what you do for your clients, it’s about your accountability for what happens.”

“‘I’m sure if you talk to the people who have achieved success in the field, they feel the same way. You’ve got to perform.’

Finding home

Dreyer was born in Panama to parents who grew up during the Great Depression. His father was a combat pilot who flew more than 40 missions in World War II, was shot down and was a prisoner of war for two years.

The family lived in Massachusetts, Virginia, Ohio and Europe, among other locations, before finally settling down in Sacramento, just as Dreyer was starting high school. The moving around, he said, made the family that much closer. “Because that’s who you’re always with; that’s your environment, your nucleus,” said Dreyer, who has two older brothers. “If you’ve ever seen the movie ‘The Great Santini’ – that was my life, or at least it felt like it. So when I see that movie, it’s normal. My dad was very athletic and competitive. Our sport was tennis, not basketball. If tennis could be a contact sport, he made it that.”

After four years of high school in Sacramento and another four years of
undergrad studies just down the road at UC Davis, Dreyer got the itch to pick up and be on his way again. He’d applied and been accepted to nearby McGeorge School of Law in Sacramento but also took a shot at Hastings, initially missing the cut there.

He reapplied – anxious to get out of Sacramento, he said – and was accepted a week before classes started. He packed up and headed for the city, without a place to live and with very little money but with enough resourcefulness to survive.

At Hastings, Dreyer worked for a magistrate, for professors and with the school’s prestigious trial college of advocacy. And it was where he met his wife. His time at Hastings, he said, was the best three years of his life.

“It exploded my universe of opportunity,” Dreyer said. “I just got a remarkable series of opportunities that, at that time, I didn’t appreciate I was getting them. But in retrospect, they all shaped and defined who I am.”

Indeed, the opportunities kept coming after law school. First, Dreyer worked in the Sacramento County District Attorney’s Office, where he seized upon the chance to put to work and refine his courtroom skills. Two successful years later, in 1981, Dreyer was getting calls from civil law firms, mostly insurance defense specialists. While flattered at still getting calls from civil law firms, mostly insurance defense specialists, Dreyer decided to decline the offers until one came from the firm of Morton Friedman, the top plaintiffs’ attorney in the Sacramento area at the time.

“I had just gone through a very serious child abuse case, and I was taken with the fact that I couldn’t do anything for the victims,” Dreyer explained. “I could only put their parents in jail, which didn’t seem very productive to me. I was in a spot mentally where I thought the victims really weren’t being taken care of.”

So Dreyer told Friedman’s partner Wade Thompson he would take the job on the condition that he was allowed to try cases. “He said, ‘I promise you, you’ll go to trial.’ And that’s what I’ve been doing ever since,” Dreyer said.

Social impact

With more than 30 years and 120 jury trials under his belt, it’s tough for Dreyer to single out individual cases. To others, he may be known best for representing the Oakland Raiders and their re-viled owner Al Davis in a 2003 business fraud case that resulted in a $34.5 million award for the franchise.

The cases that resonate with him, however, are the ones that have the most social impact, he said. One in particular was a 1998 wrongful-death case against the State of California and Granite Construction involving a 33-year-old off-duty sheriff’s deputy who was killed in a highway motorcycle accident while riding through a roadway construction zone on his way to work. The defense blamed the accident on the victim’s inattentiveness and offered as much as $2 million to settle. Representing the wife of the deceased – the couple had two young children – Dreyer claimed the construction zone was set up improperly. The jury awarded the plaintiff $6.5 million, the largest wrongful-death verdict in Sacramento at the time.

“It was a mixed marriage – he was white and she’s black,” Dreyer offered, and that was a powerful aspect of the case because back then there was still a real bias, he said.

More important, the case resulted in change. “The Jungsten case affected the state and the construction company and how they do their roadway construction,” Dreyer said, “so that was a benefit to everybody – a real seminal case.

“That’s the impact of the plaintiffs’ practice,” he added. “The fact is we are the last line of defense a regular person has to protect them against large corporations and insurance carriers – because if we’re not there, they will get run right over.”

Putting clients first

Dreyer finds it a challenge to pull himself away from his work when there are people – clients especially – depending on him. But when he does get out of the office, he subscribes to the work-hard, play-hard maxim. He enjoys snow skiing and playing tennis, and for years he’s been a regular in pickup basketball games.

But if he treks to Lake Tahoe, where he spends a lot of time, or another destination, he takes his work with him, he said. “I guarantee every single guy or gal (in plaintiffs’ law) that is successful in their practice – they work seven days a week,” Dreyer said. “And they don’t have to financially. But they do because it’s the right thing to do for their clients.”

Dreyer, 58, said he doesn’t really have an “off” switch, which may explain why retirement is not in his future plans. He wants to maximize his time on the planet, he said, and have the biggest and most positive impact he can. “I want to make a difference, so that’s what drives me,” he said. “I can’t make a difference by being on a beach. I guess the message is that I plan on continuing to work and continuing to do what I’m capable of doing for people.”

There’s no mistaking Dreyer’s passion for his work, and he would encourage others getting started in law to follow his lead. Without the enjoyment, he said, “it’s just hard work.

“We’re a nation of laws, and lawyers kind of have the keys to the kingdom,” Dreyer said. “If you find an area of the law that you want to be in, that you have a passion for, then you’ll enjoy it and succeed.

“And success is not measured by money, it’s measured by accomplishment and making a difference,” he added. “If you’re good at it, you’re going to make money. And if you’re doing something you love, you’re going to be just fine.”

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