



Profile: Rene Turner Sample

Influenced by her strong faith and personal family struggles, lifelong Fresno resident keeps her focus on the client's best interest and keeps her ego out of it

BY STEPHEN ELLISON

Caring about the client is a crucial characteristic of any lawyer, no matter which side they represent. But the biggest difference Rene Turner Sample has seen since transitioning from civil defense attorney to plaintiffs' trial lawyer is how much she truly cares about her clients.

Sample, a founding partner of Fresno-based Cornwell & Sample, loves being a trial lawyer, especially figuring out the issues and the competition, the part "where you get out of it what you put into it," she said. And while there's only a fine line between the two sides when it comes to work ethic, there are significant disparities in approaching and preparing a case, she said.

Feeling the justice

"From the plaintiffs' side, you're building a case; from the defense side, you're batting it down," Sample explained. "I don't want to minimize that role; it's not like it's easy work. But it's just a different approach and a different reward. With the defense, you feel the *win*. With the plaintiffs' side, it's more you feel the *justice*."

That very sentiment likely was the motive behind Sample starting her own plaintiffs' firm after working several years in defense and private counsel for insurance companies. As a defense lawyer, she certainly didn't mind the competition, solving problems and going for the win, not to mention getting plenty of trial experience. Ultimately, though, plaintiffs' work contained an element that cut much deeper.

"My Christianity and faith are very important to me. As plaintiffs' lawyers, we have a fiduciary obligation to our clients, to put our clients' needs before our own;



Sample

that is Christian ministry," Sample said. "But I didn't know that's how it was going to impact me. I went into it because it's a very similar type of law to what I was doing,

I love trial work, and it just seemed like a good type of work to start my own practice.

Now it's about people

"Before, everything about law was competition and the win, and switching to it being about the people has been unbelievably rewarding," she continued. "I'm feeling like I'm living on a purpose. I feel like God gave me a skill set and life experience, and I'm really able to put it to its correct use."

Indeed, since she became a plaintiffs' trial lawyer, Sample has shown there's almost nothing she isn't capable of accomplishing. She has tried more than 50 jury trials to verdict in the San Joaquin Valley and is one of the valley's few plaintiffs' lawyers to have two personal-injury verdicts in excess of \$1 million.

Sample was the first female member of the San Joaquin Valley Chapter of the American Board of Trial Advocates and remains the only female member of the chapter who specializes in plaintiff's personal injury. She also is past president of the Central California Trial Lawyers Association and an active board member of Consumer Attorneys of California.

Sample is a frequent lecturer on civil litigation, having taught many of the Central Valley's litigators as an adjunct faculty member at her alma mater, San Joaquin College of Law.

Some of her recent trial results include: a slip and fall case resulting in shoulder replacement surgery for which she obtained a \$1.2 million jury verdict; a vehicle accident resulting in mild traumatic brain injury for which her client received a \$2 million jury verdict; a metal object in a restaurant meal resulting in dental injuries for which a jury awarded her client \$300,000; and an insurance bad-faith case involving an insurance company's failure to pay a severely injured plaintiff the \$15,000 policy limit in a timely manner, for which she obtained a \$900,000 jury verdict.

From childhood poverty to the law

Born and raised in Fresno, Sample grew up in poverty, she said, as her parents were very young when they married. She recalled the young moment when she fell in love with the idea of a career in law; it was when she was in the sixth grade, and her father introduced her to a female judge.

"That was a long time ago, and we didn't have a lot of exposure to professional women," she said. "But as soon as I met her, I was just focused on wanting to be a judge when I grow up. ... It's funny because part of that story was I was in the sixth grade, and back then [the TV show] 'Laugh-In' was a big deal. So I was going to be a lawyer and a go-go dancer. I settled and became a trial lawyer."

The young Sample never wavered from her aspirations. She never had any other interests and always loved school, so it was pretty much a foregone



conclusion that she would attend law school. She stayed close to home for all her higher education, attending Fresno State as an undergrad. And she put herself on the fast track.

"I met my husband when I was 16. ... He had told me he wouldn't marry me until I graduated from college," Sample recalled. "So I graduated in five semesters."

For law school, Sample went on to San Joaquin College, which was a four-year night program at the time, she said. She and her husband married during her first year of law school and had their first child during the summer between her third and fourth years at San Joaquin. Her plan at the time was to work part time and stay at home to raise children. But during her final year of law school, she took a trial-practice class taught by the hiring partner from the largest law firm in Fresno, and after the class he invited her to interview at the firm.

"Initially, I said no," Sample recalled. "But when I went to the interview and met all the lawyers, I could tell my personality was so much like theirs. I just decided to give it a try, and I ended up taking a full-time position. Later on, I cut back my hours when my kids got a little older. But that's how I started out, and I just never looked back. I still love being a trial lawyer."

From Allstate to practicing with Steve Cornwell

When the time came to cut back her workload, Sample took a job as in-house counsel with Allstate Insurance, staying there about five years before she got the bug to start her own practice. She met up with her former colleague, Steve Cornwell, whom she considered a mentor, and told him she had decided to go be a plaintiffs' lawyer.

"He said, 'OK, let's do it.' I wasn't even thinking he would come out," Sample said. "It was awesome because he's like 20 years my senior and has this unbelievable reputation. So the two of us

started this practice, and what was great was we took all of those insurance defense files (from the firm) with us and finished them up. Obviously, we weren't going to be in competition with them; we were going into plaintiffs' law. So we finished them up as our own firm. It gave us a cushion where we were getting an hourly wage while we were building up our plaintiffs' practice. ... It was an easy transition the whole way."

Personal struggle influences perception of cases

In terms of recent memorable cases, Sample recalled a client of hers, a woman, who had a history of homelessness and addiction and had been severely injured. Because of her personal experience with having a loved one in recovery, her son, Sample believed she had a unique ability to see past a person's perceived baggage, and the entire ordeal made her a better lawyer.

"I think I've always been fairly non-judgmental. Any kind of judgment I had in me I lost a decade ago going through what we went through with our son," she explained. "I was able to get full value for her case."

"That's one of the things that was part lawyering and part really caring and not being afraid of the risk that a jury may not warm up to her. I had full confidence that a jury would be able to see her for the woman she really was and not for her past. I've always said, 'You know how to have a great verdict? Have a great case.' The great verdicts come from just being there and not giving up too soon."

When she's at trial, Sample's goal is to simply get the jury to drop their barriers and actually hear and listen to her case. Jurors, she said, are taken out of their world and put into a courtroom to hear someone else's problems, and they go in with the thought that the only answer is money. Going in with that mindset makes most jurors uncomfortable about the entire process, she said.

"If they sense the trial is all about money, they have a hard time listening," Sample said. "So you end up spending a lot of time with clients to get them to speak without an agenda. When someone is just being real, you can listen. So if they feel like you're just trying to increase the value of the case, they tune you out. In a trial setting, you just have to get them to break down those barriers so they can hear your case."

"I'm pretty animated in court, so they'll usually listen to me," she continued. "But that doesn't necessarily mean they'll feel the case. They can't feel the case for what it is unless all the witnesses have that same sincerity. And it takes a lot of time to get witnesses to let their guard down and say what's real."

Working in the recovery community

When she's not in the courtroom or the office, Sample stays active in the recovery community, particularly with a local nonprofit rehabilitation center where her son found recovery several years ago. She helps raise money for the center and, along with her son, co-hosts Sunday night dinners for young men he is helping at the center. She's said she does it for her son, for the people who need the support and for the families who are going through the same difficult ordeal she endured.

"There was a time when I was really tired, and I'm not tired right now," Sample explained. "I'm at that restored part of my life now. Life isn't always easy, but I'm at that easy part right now, and I have the energy to help these kids because I know their parents are tired."

Sample also spends time with her nine-month-old granddaughter, who lives in Virginia. And she has another grandchild on the way.

For those with aspirations of a career in law, Sample said they should read cases while in law school so they can actually learn to think like a lawyer. When they actually begin practicing, it's all about work



ethic, she said, and trusting their instincts. Most of all, they should truly believe in the client-comes-first approach.

“Take it seriously that you’re putting your client’s interest before your own,” she

said. “If you keep that as your focus, it will guide you to do the right thing in how much work to put into a file, the decisions you make about your case and, most of all, how to keep your ego out of it.”

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