



Profile: Chris Viadro

Practicing law wasn't what he had hoped for, until losing a job led to his "light-bulb moment"

BY STEPHEN ELLISON

Experience tends to be the trump card in the legal world, as it is in many a profession. While talent, passion and a little bit of Lady Luck certainly are crucial to success, there's no substitute for having been there and done that.

In Chris Viadro's case, he played his hand. And won.

The co-founding partner of Butler Viadro in Oakland got a couple of early lessons on the business side of law. But he never shied away from the work, and that drive led him to a pivotal point in his career.

"There I was, basically three and a half years out of law school having had three jobs, and that's not really the position you want to be in," Viadro said, retracing the early years of his career. "But then I started working for another plaintiff's lawyer, Steve Stein. I started doing contract work for him, and that was my light bulb moment. He was passionate about what he did; he was fighting for his clients. For me, I had gone straight from high school to college to law school, and while I had worked, I was still kind of a young kid and hadn't really pondered what I wanted in life. Seeing Steve's passion, dedication and energy, again, I would call it my light bulb moment. That's when I knew I wanted to be a plaintiff's lawyer."

Viadro eventually landed with the prestigious Veen Firm, where he developed into a specialist in worker's compensation cases and worked his way up to team leader before splitting off with James Butler to start their own firm. Worker's comp cases continue to be a significant portion of their practice, about 25 percent, and Viadro feels a hint of pride in having such a unique specialty.

"I remember when I interviewed at the Veen Firm, I was told I would be working on workers' comp cases, and I almost didn't take the job because of a



Viadro

"Most firms do either personal injury or worker's comp," he continued. "There are very few that do both under the same roof, and when they do, it's usually with different attorneys. And there are even fewer in the state where the same attorney is handling both. I feel fortunate to be able to serve my clients in that fashion, where the communication is happening between me and myself on how to best navigate these two cases. You can have a personal injury and worker's comp case for the same injury; there's definite interplay between the two, and one case can absolutely adversely impact the other. Having one attorney handle both sides, I think, is the best and most efficient way to do it."

Besides the workers' comp cases, Viadro and Butler for the past 10 years have handled catastrophic personal injury cases involving industrial accidents, dangerous premises, defective products, maritime accidents, auto accidents and professional negligence, among others. They try all cases together, deploying an approach that Viadro describes as a "yin-yang kind of thing," where he handles the liability aspect and Butler handles the damages.

"We're very different people, and together, for that reason, we make a good

complete and utter misunderstanding of the practice," Viadro recalled.

"Now, I look back and think it was the best decision professionally I ever made.

trial team," Viadro explained. "I would describe myself a bit more as a tactician. My strengths are addressing the right-wrong issues and the tactical aspects, and he is probably stronger on the damages front, conveying those concepts to the jury where they can relate to them."

Raised on law

Viadro was born and raised in San Francisco, where both his parents were attorneys and may have influenced his career choice, he said. His father worked for an insurance defense firm where he did all the appellate work and later became a hired appellate gun of sorts, Viadro said.

His mother got off to a relatively late start in law, launching her practice at age 51, which Viadro admired.

"That was fairly impressive to see her take on a career at that age at a time when there were not that many women in the profession," he said. "So, yeah, I wouldn't say I went to college to be a doctor or a veterinarian. It came back to what was familiar to me."

Viadro went back east for undergraduate school at the University of Pennsylvania. He returned to San Francisco for law school, where he attended University of San Francisco School of Law. There, he was a member of the Law Review and graduated cum laude.

Upon graduation, times were tight in the law community, he said, and he took a job at an insurance defense firm that was hiring. But, at the time, having graduated in the top 10 percent of his class, Viadro felt there had to be something better.

"I thought I should be in a fancy law firm downtown," he recalled. "So, I switched after a year, and I disliked it so much; I was living in the library 12 hours a day. I was not fulfilling my youthful misimpression of what those firms were like."



Six months later, Viadro was back at the insurance defense firm, doing predominantly medical malpractice defense and elder abuse defense cases. After about a year and a half, another career change came abruptly. But it was all for the best.

“That firm lost one of its clients that accounted for perhaps 50 percent of its business,” he said. “The three of us that had arrived the latest were laid off. ... When that firm halved in size, it was the best thing that happened to me. It put me on a path to professional and personal reflection.”

Working for Stein and then Veen, indeed, put Viadro on the plaintiff law map. Then came another fateful turn during the Great Recession in 2008, which forced the Veen Firm, like many companies across all industries, to reassess its business model, Viadro said. Bill Veen offered to work out deals with all his team leaders who wanted to start their own firms with their practices and clients. Viadro and Butler, who had previously toyed with the idea of going out on their own, took the deal and the leap into firm ownership.

“I hear all these stories about departures that aren’t so smooth, and I’m forever thankful that I have continued to have a good relationship with everyone at the Veen Firm, as well as Bill. I owe him a great debt for just the skills I learned there,” Viadro said.

“We had about as smooth a transition as we could hope for,” he continued. “There was certainly anxiety, always wondering will the cases come in. You’re like that fledgling standing on the edge of the nest. But, really, because of the amicable departure, we had cash flow within two months. We really didn’t have the financial stresses of those attorneys who leave with no cases, or they leave and end up in litigation with their prior firm. I could not have drawn it up any better.”

Plugging away

Viadro said about 90 to 93 percent of their cases end up settling, meaning he doesn’t get to trial as often as he would like.

But he and Butler are always ready, willing and able to take every case to trial; he called it the exciting part of what they do.

When a case does go to trial, thorough preparation is critical, which is likely the reason so many of their cases end in settlements, he said.

“When you work a case up from the get-go, with all the appropriate experts, covering every base on your case, you’ve shown the other side you’re not just willing but also ready,” Viadro said. “There’s no typical approach other than it’s total immersion. One of the ways to prevail as a plaintiff’s lawyer is being more prepared than your opponent, and the only way to do that is to be putting in all the effort, all the time, reading everything from stem to stern. Things that you may have glossed over months before may become significant.

“And, of course, (when in trial) all the other things I enjoy doing in life get put aside,” he added.

When it came to some of his more memorable cases, Viadro recalled a brain injury trial he worked years ago. It involved a woman in a car accident who suffered what was medically dubbed a mild traumatic brain injury. But, looking back, Viadro said it was clearly a case of if we had known then what we know now about concussions.

“When we tried this case, it was a very different world,” he explained. “We were bringing a concept that couldn’t be seen on an X-ray, couldn’t be touched, and trying to convey the magnitude of the injury notwithstanding the fact that even in the medical world it was called a *mild* traumatic brain injury. There never was a bigger misnomer for something that can be quite life-altering.”

Despite the obstacles, Viadro obtained a \$4 million verdict.

Another case involved a piece of farm equipment that didn’t have a seat-belt and resulted in the death of a farmworker. Viadro won that case and was told by the defense that the manufacturer would be installing seatbelts. “I find product cases particularly satisfying

because there’s the potential you can effect real change on a more fast-track basis,” he said. “It’s one of the reasons I get value out of what we do.”

Leisure and wisdom

When he’s not at work, Viadro spends time with his wife of 20 years and their two teenage children. And when he’s not doing that, he enjoys playing soccer, competing in an over-30 league on Sundays, and riding his horse. “Horsemanship has been the most challenging thing I’ve ever done,” he said. “It causes you to focus on yourself, focus on your horse, on everything in such minute levels. My horse knows when I turn my head in one direction, and these can all be subtle cues. I think my horse has helped make me more mindful, not just when I’m on the horse, but when I’m doing other things as well.”

Viadro has served on the Board of Governors for USF’s law school since 2010 and just finished his term as board president. This month, he is receiving the John J. Meehan Alumni Fellow Award, which is given to an alum for mentorship of students. So, giving advice to aspiring lawyers is something he really didn’t have to ponder.

“I can tell you the advice I *do* give,” he said. “The legal world has changed quite a bit in the last five years in terms of the number of people going to law school and the availability of work. I tell students they need to be thinking about getting a job after law school on their *first* day of law school. They need to be networking. It’s very hard to get job interviews; it’s very easy to get informational interviews. If there’s only one person in the legal field in their network, reach out to that person, then that person is going to know five other people. It’s like a tree: They will get where they ultimately need to get through those branches.”

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