



Profile: Issa Michael

Palestinian native makes good on the immigrant dream, keeping it small, simple and successful

By **STEPHEN ELLISON**

A casual, no-frills approach hasn't been a barrier to success for trial attorney Issa Michael. On the contrary, he prefers having a "handshake-type practice" and takes pride in running a small, close-knit firm.

The Michael Law Firm, indeed, avoids the stuffiness and tight-collar ways that seem typical of many law practices but does it without compromising integrity, diligence or passion.

"It's a lifestyle-based practice," Michael explained. "We're a 9-to-5 shop, we avoid nights, we avoid weekends, unless it's absolutely necessary or we're preparing for trial. We're not lazy. But we work to live; we don't live to work."

"Part of that is our office is on Union Street in the Marina district," he continued. "We fly under the radar. We're not downtown; we come to work, and our office policy is "wear what you want." And most of us wear baseball caps or yoga pants. Just about everyone in the office has a gym membership down the street, and we encourage that."

That's not to say Michael and his team are so casual as to be pushovers. When it comes to advocacy and fighting for their clients, they do whatever it takes to obtain the best possible resolution for the individuals they're representing. Michael has secured tens of millions of dollars in verdicts and settlements for his clients in cases ranging from wrongful death and catastrophic injury to product defects and elder abuse.

Before opening his plaintiff's firm in 2003, Michael worked for several years in the insurance defense arena. It was a good way to gain experience and sharpen his trial skills, he said. But he soon realized it was not in his nature to help



Michael

corporations and insurance companies that harmed individuals.

Goal: Be a lawyer, get a job

"The goal was to be a lawyer and to get a job," Michael said. "Coming out

of law school, like most lawyers, you don't know what those jobs entail unless you worked in those jobs during law school. And I didn't really do that; I didn't intern per se with any trial firms, but I knew I wanted to be a litigator-slash-trial lawyer somewhere. So, I got my first job in corporate defense because that's where most of the jobs were.

"I worked in defense for about five years or so, then I realized my personality and my heart were more in line with representing victims, not corporate entities and certainly not insurance companies," he continued. "That was the first motivator. Second was I recognized that insurance defense was on the downturn. I looked at my bosses, and they worked harder than I did. They were in their 50s, and frankly, they worked too hard, and they didn't seem to make as much as plaintiff's lawyers, in all candor. So, that was another commonsense motivator. The goal was to maximize your earning potential short and long term, and I didn't see that working in defense because that was an industry on its way down, not up."

After his five-year run as a defense attorney, Michael worked for about a year

with a prominent plaintiff's lawyer in the Federal Employer's Liability Act (FELA) arena, representing injured railroad workers against their employers in federal court.

New law firm with no clients

Again, he soon realized the job wasn't going where he wanted, so he told himself "never again" and decided to hang out his shingle in 2003. With no clients, no money, no family money to back him up, and a wife and two children at the time, Michael launched his own firm.

"That was a rather risky thing to do," he admitted. "I started off in an executive work office on the Embarcadero, where there were other lawyers. I would just do whatever I could to pay the bills. I would run around the office to try to find if I could try any cases for anyone, however small, and I did. That's how I got going. Then my practice just sort of took off almost immediately.

"I knew I could pull it off because I was a local boy, and I believed in myself," he said. "But it was tough ... I had to start from zero. When you're younger and you're ambitious, it's balls to the wall, right? So, you look back at things you did when you started your own practice, and you wonder how you did that. But you don't have a choice, and that helps."

The immigrant dream

Michael's family migrated to the United States from Jerusalem in 1972. The immigrant dream, at least within his family, was to have a lawyer and a doctor in the household. And his brother became a doctor, he said, so he knew law likely was in his future. That was his initial inspiration for going to law school. But there were other contributing factors.



Michael attended San Francisco State University and earned a bachelor's degree in marketing. After college, he worked in his field of study for about two years, but the timing turned out to be poor, and he resorted to his Plan B.

"During that time, I realized that corporate America was not what I anticipated it might be," he explained. "My backup plan was to go back to law school. I entered corporate America in the early 1990s, pre-dot-com, and I worked in tech sales. And at that time, the industry wasn't what it is today – it was actually a down economy. Plus, I realized this was not what I wanted to do."

While his road to success has been a bit bumpy, arriving there never went to his head. Even today, as a seasoned trial lawyer, Michael doesn't feel the need to self-promote or to grow too big. In fact, he prefers keeping things small and personal.

Small practice, fewer trials

"We don't do a big volume – we handle less than 50 cases," he said. "We don't do mass advertising, don't do billboards – I never wanted to be that billboard guy. Whatever marketing we do is local and hand-shaking. I think that's what makes my practice unique – I'm a San Francisco guy, for the most part, and it's more of a handshake-type practice. Over the years, you plant seeds, and it's word of mouth."

The limited volume means fewer cases, and that typically results in far fewer trials than many of the plaintiff's lawyers at bigger firms. But, again, Michael has come to accept that part of the business. Certainly, he doesn't get into the courtroom as often as he'd like, but his firm maintains the philosophy common across the plaintiff's bar: Prepare every case for trial from filings through discovery, and the client will get maximum value, even in settlement.

"If that's what's best for the client, and it usually is, then clients make informed decisions about resolutions," he explained. "We help them, and we don't

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Getaway Spot: Home with family (wife of 21 years and 3 children); any tennis court

Go-To Music or Artist: Frank Sinatra, Tony Bennett

Recommended Reading: "Open: An Autobiography of Andre Agassi"

Dream Job: Golf pro or college professor

Words to Live By: "Be a leader, not a follower."

stand in the way. If that means the case doesn't go to trial, then it doesn't go to trial. It's really what's best for the client.

"Between court calls and having young associates working for me now," Michael continued, "when I finally do get to court, I look around, and I joke, 'Is this what a courtroom looks like?' I try to be humble about it. As much as we want to try and become famous and post big verdicts, it's just a combination of the marketplace and being a small practice. And I think even the best trial lawyers are not getting out more than twice a year. You accept that, even though your initial ambition in getting into the business was to try cases."

When he does get to trial, Michael said he tries to remind himself that jurors are just as intelligent, if not more so, as he is. He said there's no magic wand to wave or magic tricks to perform. It's simple, he said: His goal and his job is to be the messenger of the evidence. And he always tries to present the evidence in the most credible fashion possible, starting with being credible himself from start to finish.

"That's sort of the school of thought by the top trial lawyers in the country – be authentic, be yourself and deliver what you promise," he said.

Win-loss

Michael took that approach with one memorable case against Yellow Cab, representing an individual. After a low-ball offer from the defense, the case went to trial, and Michael won. Then something

unusual happened: The judge, acting as the 13th juror in Michael's view, cut the verdict in half. Michael and his team decided they weren't going to accept that decision, and they opted for a new trial.

In the second trial, with a second set of jurors, Michael and his team obtained a jury verdict three times more than the first trial. But it wasn't over.

"The second judge, same case, different judge, also cut the verdict in half, saying the jury gave us too much money," Michael recalled. "I don't know if that's ever happened. We were defiant, and we proved our point, but ultimately that was disappointing, that the courts have that much discretion. That's perhaps one of the disappointments in the system that I see – sometimes courts have too much discretion on verdicts that are actually meritorious and reasonable.

"And yet the defense is relentless at using whatever resources or tricks at their disposal in making sure plaintiffs don't go to trial. And if they do, they're going to suffer for it even if they win. I don't like that. But we keep fighting."

Life balance

When he's not in the office or at trial, Michael likes to play golf and is a USTA tennis player, getting out on the court three or four times a week at the Bay Club SF. He and his wife also are actively involved in various nonprofits connected to Palestine. Much of that work involves children and overseas medical missions in war-torn areas.

Some of the organizations they support are Rebuilding Alliance, which includes rebuilding homes that have been destroyed; the Palestinian Children's Relief Fund, for which doctors from the U.S. travel to the Middle East to operate and assist children with cancer; and a program that donates LED lights to children in Gaza, so they can do homework and read during most of the day when the power is limited.

That work, Michael said, overlaps with groups such as Jewish Voice for



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Peace to promote dialogue for justice and peace between Arabs and Israelis in the Middle East.

“My ethnicity kind of defines my practice,” Michael said. “I work heavily in the Middle Eastern communities, and I speak the language, I’m fluent in Arabic. I work heavily in my ethnic community,

all Middle Eastern. That’s one of the angles. I think that’s what makes my story unique.”

When it comes to advising younger lawyers or law students, Michael kept it short and simple.

“Be honest in everything you do,” he said. “Be honest with yourself, with your

clients and the people you deal with. And then the chips fall where they fall.”

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