



Profile: Sara Peters

Long hours feel a lot different when you're working on something you care about

BY STEPHEN ELLISON

Some plaintiff's personal-injury cases might seem rather simple to the untrained eye, but chances are they didn't start out that way. It's because of the work of attorneys such as Sara Peters that the average person – or your typical juror – can come to a reasonable conclusion in favor of their clients.

Peters, a shareholder with Walkup Melodia Kelly & Schoenberger in San Francisco, says most cases she works on contain at least one unique aspect or some novel legal issue that might put them in the category of complex. And perhaps she gravitates to the cases with distinctive elements, she's not quite sure. What she's certain of is when that case is headed to trial, it's her job to make it interesting, credible and, most important, simple.

"That's not to say anything disparaging about the jury's capability to follow it," she explained. "It's just that, at that point, I've been sitting with that (case) for over a year or more, and it's easy to forget just how much new information the jury is going to have to absorb. So, I have to be choosy and really pick what matters.

"The jury is sort of a litmus test," Peters continued. "If I can't succinctly tell them why my client should win, I think the jury is going to say, 'Maybe they shouldn't win.' If you can't put that in a sentence and explain what was done wrong and why (your client) deserves to be compensated, maybe there's something missing in your case."

That shrewd trial approach, however, is used sparingly these days, as most of Peters' cases are settled. She's obtained several seven-figure settlements and at least one eight-figure settlement over the years in a wide variety of personal injury



Peters

cases such as medical malpractice, premises liability, product liability, construction employer's worksite negligence and vicarious liability of an employer for its worker's harmful behavior.

Uber and Lyft cases

Other cases that have drawn Peters' attention recently are sexual assault cases involving gig workers such as Uber and Lyft drivers. Those cases intrigue her *not* because those companies are inherently bad but because they represent a newer type of business model where there's a lot of opportunity for it to be made safer, she said.

"I like working on cases where I feel there's the possibility of real impact," Peters explained. "Not just for the one client, but when you walk away from the case, you're seeing changes being made. To me, it's rewarding working on something cutting edge like that – cutting edge in terms of the legal concepts being developed around these gig-economy

businesses and also novel in terms of the way the business owners are shaping their business."

Peters last went to trial at the beginning of 2020, and the case ended up settling mid-trial, a fortunate development, she said, because a week later, the coronavirus lockdown began, and she's sure they wouldn't have been able to wrap it up before the courts closed their doors.

The last trial before that was about two years prior, Peters said. On average she had been getting to trial once a year, but she finds it a disturbing trend to go two years without one.

"Fortunately, we've been making it a practice to do a lot more focus groups. And not just sit around tables, but really get up and do mock trials in our real cases," she said. "That's one way I've been able to keep my trial skills sharp. In addition, I teach at Stanford University in the mock trial program. Those are both ways I can stay fresh."

Starting with the yellow pages

Peters said she sort of fell into law. While she was in high school, she had been working at a coffee shop and not particularly enjoying it. Her boyfriend at the time encouraged her to do something enjoyable, and he actually suggested she try to work for a law firm, she recalled. Her first thought was she didn't know any lawyers and wouldn't know where to apply. Her boyfriend told her to try the phone book.

"So, I just started calling law firms, and I ended up working for a plaintiff's-side lawyer in high school and continued to work for plaintiff's side lawyers ever since then," Peters said. "I was intrigued by the case files that were personal injury because they involved elements of



mystery, trying to understand what went wrong and tragedy. I found them to be compelling stories that made me want to dig deeper and want to seek justice and figure out the truth of what had occurred. That kind of started me on a track that I've been on ever since."

Peters said even when she was younger, she always found herself speaking up for the underdogs that she knew in her life – a self-proclaimed "loud mouth" – and she built somewhat of a reputation as such. At that point, she hadn't yet made the connection that those traits amounted to a skill set and interest that could be used as a lawyer.

"But when I saw the legal practice up close, it clicked. I could see it really made sense for me," Peters said. "The other thing is once I started working for law firms, I just had the wonderful opportunity to work for some great lawyers. I worked with Jude Basile, and I got to work in the final months of trial prep on a really interesting civil rights, police abuse case. Just opportunities that opened my eyes to how exciting this work could be."

Peters attended UCLA for her undergraduate studies and earned a bachelor's degree in philosophy and Middle Eastern studies, graduating with honors. She went on to Stanford University School of Law, where she was an editor with the Stanford Journal of International Law and earned honors in moot court and mock trial.

During law school, Peters never had any second thoughts about striving for a career in plaintiff's personal-injury law, even though the culture at Stanford Law bent heavily toward business law.

"Stanford Law School tends to produce corporate lawyers, you know, public interest lawyers in the public sector," Peters said. "By that point, I'd already made up my mind. Just in terms of my personal life, I didn't want the billable hour, and I also knew I'd discovered in plaintiff's law something really rewarding, where I was able to make personal connections with clients and work on cases I felt were making the world a better place. I stuck with that pretty doggedly."

REDIRECT

- **Getaway Spot:** A mountaintop somewhere I haven't been
- **Go-To Music or Artist:** Nina Simone
- **Recommended Reading:** "The Warmth of Other Suns," "Battle Cry of Freedom," "Wild Swans: Three Daughters of China"
- **Dream Job:** The one I have is pretty great.
- **Words to Live By:** "There are no ordinary people. You have never talked to a mere mortal." – C.S. Lewis, *Weight of Glory*

Investigative skills

In addition to the Uber and Lyft cases, Peters excels in elder abuse nursing home cases. While they have a tendency to carry with them communication obstacles because she's representing someone who may be relatively voiceless, or perhaps they've passed away, she said those challenges motivate her even more. "It's a population that's vulnerable, and it's that type of case that makes me want to stay late at the office, getting to the bottom of it."

Workplace injury cases are another area Peters recently had success with. She represented a client who suffered an electrical shock injury while on the job, and it resulted in severe injuries including amputation. Her team got involved late in what she described as a case teeming with complex documents, and they were able to piece together a puzzle, she said. The result was an eight-figure settlement.

"To some extent, we were being lawyers but were really investigators, getting to the bottom of what happened here, what went wrong," she explained. "That was another one of those cases that make the work very rewarding."

While Peters said she tries not to completely blur the line between the professional and the personal, she admits it's nearly impossible not to care deeply for some clients with whom she's established a close working relationship. Many

of those people stay in touch still, she said, yet another gratifying aspect of her work, especially when they tell her she made a difference to them; for instance, when they say they're still benefitting from the equipment they were able to purchase or their quality of life continues to improve in other ways as a direct result of their successful legal battle. Such clients-turned-friends continue to enrich her life, she said.

"One that comes to mind was a woman I represented a few years ago – she knew she was going to die," Peters recalled. "It was a medical malpractice case. She was actually a physician, and I represented her with respect to her misdiagnosis of cancer that resulted in what was ultimately a fatal diagnosis. She ended up surviving for a few more years, and she would email me every year just to kind of keep me posted: 'Hey, I'm still alive! I'm beating the odds!'"

"Then, I got a message after her death, one that she had obviously prepared in advance," Peters continued. "She was just a beautiful individual who lived such an amazing life and affected so many people but still had the time to think of her lowly lawyer. She just left behind such an impact on me personally."

Time for life, faith

When she's not working, Peters loves the outdoors. She and her husband stay busy with work and taking care of three young children, but when they are able, the couple enjoys bicycling, camping, backpacking and touring – putting skins on their snowboards to climb a mountain and then snowboarding down. She also enjoys reading science fiction and fantasy stories, she said, but lately, most of her leisure time has been spent raising a family.

"Sometimes it's more about what do I have to do when I'm not working," she joked. "I mean, I like it, but it's basically mandatory, which is take care of my kids. I have three boys, one 6-year-old and twins that are 4. They're a little bit of a handful."



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Another important component of Peters' personal life is her faith, and lately it's having an increasing impact on her work. Her family hosts a church group in their home periodically, but when it comes to how her religious beliefs impact her day-to-day routine at the office, she admits it hadn't been something she practiced on a regular basis, until recently. One example is how she handles someone on the other side of a case who is being unpleasant.

"I've been making more of an effort to pray for people who are being jerks and to consciously think about how I respond to them," Peters explained. "Not

that I'm going to be a doormat or ever give an inch in terms of my client's rights or what's best for my client. But I believe I can be a zealous advocate and, at the same time, I can actually love people who are being difficult. I can extend empathy to them. That's really been an important part of my development as a lawyer, seeing how those pieces fit together, the zealous advocacy and my core beliefs."

When it comes to passing along a bit of wisdom to young, aspiring lawyers, Peters said the key to her success and happiness has been finding an area of law that gets her excited to go to the office every

day. In other words, work on something that matters to you.

"Don't only think about the prestige of the law firm where you want to work, or what your family will think about it, or what the hours will be," she said. "Think about whether the work you'll be doing is something that really matters to you personally. Long hours feel a lot different when you're working on something you care about."

Stephen Ellison is a freelance writer based in San Jose. Contact him at ssjellison@aol.com.