

Profile: Lauren Cerri

Sexual-abuse specialist practiced personal-injury law until she found her passion in speaking for abused children

By Stephen Ellison

A lawyer's journey doesn't always include a broad spectrum of roles and duties, but on occasion, a story comes along showing how a successful lawyer started as a lower-tier associate and worked their way up to top-level trial attorney. Lauren Cerri is on that short list.

A child sexual abuse specialist with Corsiglia McMahon & Allard in San Jose, Cerri followed a relatively long and winding path to becoming an accomplished plaintiffs' lawyer, and now she can look back and appreciate all those early years and the many steps that helped get her there.

"I worked as an administrative assistant and I worked as a secretary for a year at a law firm," she recalled. "It was a civil defense firm in Connecticut. (One partner) represented the Connecticut Department of Transportation and the other was a medical-malpractice lawyer. That's when I realized that I loved this stuff. I was picking the lawyers' brains constantly, asking questions, looking at every legal word in the dictionary. And that really solidified for me that I wanted to be a lawyer. What kind I wasn't exactly sure, and I was terrified of the bar exam.

"So, I went to UConn Law School," she continued. "And I went to school at night, so I actually worked full time through law school at a preeminent personal injury firm in Hartford. … I always say I got my real legal education in the basement of that firm and from those trial lawyers because they just really inspired me to make a difference to help people and to be a trial lawyer."

While helping on a case there, where they were representing the victim, she learned the extent of the harm and damage from these cases, and when she began working as a lawyer at another firm in Bridgeport, Connecticut, she eventually learned not only about the extent of the abuse and how it harmed sexual abuse victims, but also the cover-ups and the extent the church would go to protect the priests and the institution. The Bridgeport firm was a pioneer in bringing sexual abuse cases against the Catholic Church and predator priests, Cerri said.



Cerri

She then began working on a public-school case and realized she had found her passion: helping victims of childhood sexual abuse. But before all those sexual abuse cases, Cerri started out handling minor-impact, soft-tissue cases, learning "from the bottom."

"I got the bottom of the barrel cases there," she recalled. "I was trying these minor impacts and soft-tissue cases, and I was losing a number of my biggest (cases). … But that's where I learned from my losses, learned from really good lawyers how to tell stories, not using pen and paper, but using my voice and body language.

"Then I got engaged, moved to California and had to start all over," she continued. "So, I had to take the bar exam again, and I really had to start all over because I had no connections here. It was difficult."

Cerri, however, landed firmly on her feet. She started out working as a clerk and then for a short period of time at a plaintiffs' firm in San Francisco on a part-time basis. She had read an article about Robert Allard and his work with USA Swimming. She thought to herself immediately it was exactly what she wanted to do. Cerri reached out to Allard, who at the time was not in need of an associate.

"He put my CV in a drawer, and he kept it," she said. "And a year later, he called me. Here I am now; it'll be 10 years in January."

East Coast transplant

Born and raised in Norwalk, Connecticut, a young Cerri had aspirations to be a writer. She loved using a pen and paper to be a storyteller, she said. After graduating from University of Connecticut, she realized she wasn't alone in her writing aspirations, and that sparked some fear that the competition would be fierce. But she also still wasn't a hundred percent sure writing was her all-in career choice – it was still up in the air.

"I had done a semester in London when I was in college, and my mom's from Scotland, so I thought maybe I want to go into international law," Cerri said. "I was kind of trying to find myself, so I went to Scotland, and I worked and lived there with my aunt. … I worked in a call center trying to sell phone services, and I didn't do very well with my American accent. I worked in a pub as a bar mate, kind of spilling beer all over myself. When I came back, that's when I decided I want to go to law school."

Cerri returned to Hartford, taking those law school courses at night while

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getting in on the ground floor – or basement – of that first firm and launching her law career.

After cutting that winding path from East Coast legal assistant then rising star to West Coast start-over, Cerri still took her time finding her way to San Jose. But today, she lays claim to several seven- and eight-figure verdicts and settlements, all for clients in the plaintiffs' sexual abuse arena, and those results at times have extended beyond the courtroom.

One of her most high-profile cases involved a teen girl who was sexually assaulted by three of her male high school classmates in 2012 then bullied and shamed on social media. She committed suicide a short time later. The case changed California law by increasing penalties for teens convicted of sex acts with individuals who are incapable of giving consent.

Cerri said the underlying, big-picture purpose for her work is not just to punish one individual or institutional bad actor, but also to continue progressing toward prevention of future sexual abuse in schools, churches and other entities that are forced to establish policies because of the precedents she and her clients are setting.

"Of course, clients need to be compensated for the harm they've endured, but there's never a victim or survivor that comes into the office with that goal," she explained. "The goal is always: how do we stop this? How do we protect other children from being abused. That's why we do this – to make change by way of stricter policies and having rules in place."

For instance, now staff teachers are trained on red flags and the behaviors to look out for *before* abuse occurs, Cerri said. "So, it's training, policies, procedures, raising awareness, with the goal of eradicating sexual abuse. It's a lofty goal, but that's our aim."

Voice for the voiceless

Cerri said when she's going to trial, preparation is beyond important – it's downright critical. She said she tends to be neurotic about missing even just one minor thing in a case, so she reads every single piece of paper in the file. She's meticulous to an extreme and strives to know every single fact upside down because she doesn't want to miss even the smallest piece of key evidence. That approach is especially important in sexual abuse cases, she said, because there's so much at stake, and in most of those cases, survivors have been silenced, victimized and revictimized. So, they rely on her to be their voice.

"I get to give voice to the voiceless," she said. "So, I don't want to screw up. My approach is to know the case better than the other side, to know every single detail, especially about my client. To be able to understand the best that I can what they've been through, what they're going through, how they feel, how it's impacted them."

Trying to empathize with clients is perhaps the biggest difference between sexual-abuse and typical personal-injury cases. But there's also the difficult prospect of finding fault with the defendant, Cerri said. With personal-injury cases, a lawyer has an X-ray or a vehicle with damage – something that shows physical harm has been done. But with sexual abuse cases against institutions or mandatory reporters, a lawyer is tasked with trying to persuade a jury that people at these institutions of high standing who have great credentials have done something egregious.

"I think the biggest difference is that you can't see the injury, right?" she said. "The other differences, with car accident types of cases, it's easier for the jury to understand because you're saying this person was the driver, and they ran into me, and they're at fault. Most of the time. Whereas (with sexual abuse cases), you're going after a school district or a sporting organization or someone who wasn't the one who actually put their hands on the child. And you're trying to convince a jury to find" them to be the bad actor.

Picking out a memorable case was not difficult for Cerri. And the case happened to come just in the nick of time, as she was coming off a devastating loss that had her questioning her faith in the justice system. The memorable case involved a girl at a Santa Clara County middle school who was sexually abused by the campus band director starting at the age of 13. For three years before the abuse, the school district already had received complaints from parents about the director. Not only did the district proceed to brush those complaints under the rug, Cerri said, it also continued to give the band director positive performance reviews – even teacher of the year at one point.

"And everyone saw these wonderful things about him," Cerri said. "Meanwhile, he was sexually abusing this girl on school grounds, in his office, behind a locked door, and there was a camera mounted outside of this classroom. Just egregious. But the reason that case is so memorable to me is not only the amount of damages ($102.5 million) and that the jury understood the extent of the damage, but also 80 percent of the fault was put on the school district. The jury was able to understand that the school could have prevented her from ever meeting this man.

"It renewed my faith in the justice system," she added.

Passions abound

When she's not working, Cerri spends much of her time with her three daughters, volunteering at their schools, going on family vacations and to their

REDIRECT:

Getaway Spot: The beach in Santa Cruz with my family
Go-To Music or Artist: Any live music. I'm big into country.
Recommended Reading: "Atomic Habits" by James Clear (nonfiction); "Daisy Jones and the Six" by Taylor Jenkins Reid (fiction)
Dream Job: What I do now
Words to Live By: "Fake it until you become it." – Amy Cuddy

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sporting events. She's also an avid runner and bicyclist, having run her first half-marathon a couple years ago and hoping to do her first century (100-mile) bike ride this year.

In terms of advice for young lawyers just starting out, Cerri reflected on her own start and how she initially tried to play a part.

"I think when I first started out I wanted to be one of the guys, wearing pantsuits every day and acting like my mentors," she said. "But you really need to find your own style and voice. And find something that you're really passionate about. You can really make a difference in people's lives if your heart is into this type of work and if it's something you truly care about, truly believe.

"For example, other than that one year working at a defense firm as a legal assistant, I've always worked for plaintiffs' firms, from being a law clerk to an associate to here," Cerri continued. "I always knew that I wanted to help people, try to make a difference in their lives. So, do something you're truly, truly passionate about."

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