


# Profile: Bobby Thompson

## His David-vs.-Goliath mindset comes from growing up as the son of a trial lawyer

**By Stephen Ellison**

Good lawyers know how to make an impression on people, especially younger folks, and that's probably why Robert "Bobby" Thompson never entertained a second thought about pursuing a career in plaintiffs' law.

Thompson's father, who is about to retire after more than five decades in plaintiffs' law, not only told inspiring stories around the dinner table, but he also gave his young son firsthand, close-up glimpses at the mentality of those in his profession and what they stood for: fighting for the "little guy;" facing off against powerful insurance companies; advocating for social change.

### Helping people

That latter notion was key. The younger Thompson indeed followed his father around the workplace, to conferences and then into the profession, and like any child starting out in the shadow of a parent, he may have felt pressure to achieve. But he insists it only helped him find his own way.

"I wouldn't say it was difficult," said Thompson, who as a child, would travel with his dad to American Association of Justice events along with other attorneys' kids. "I would say that being in his shadow was more of a gift than it was a curse. Many people knew my dad and respected him, and it opened a lot of doors for me and gave me a lot of opportunities. Plus, once I started my legal career, I had a built-in mentor who had a vested interest in my success and who was willing to give me all the time in the world to help me learn and get things right. And, more important, to maintain a very high level of integrity and respect.

"There are countless stories I could tell you about being at an AAJ convention



Thompson

and meeting important people, from senators to presidential candidates to victims' rights advocates," he added. "I grew up listening to these people, so it just made a real impact on me at a very young age."

Thompson acknowledges his father's work and the dinnertime stories and the trips with dad to conferences had a tremendous influence on his decision to enter the law profession. The plaintiffs' lawyer mentality – that David-vs.-Goliath mindset – was ingrained in him at a very young age, he said. He developed a passion for wanting to help people, and when he got out of college, his indecision about a career was met with a father's wisdom.

"The dot-com bubble had burst and burned a lot of great jobs," Thompson said. "My dad said, 'Why don't you go back to school.' So, I went to law school. … I don't know that I always wanted to grow up to be a lawyer, but when it got time to be a grown-up, I thought to myself, I want to help, on a micro level; you know, make a difference in people's lives. It just seemed like the natural progression was to go to law school, help people that get screwed over."

Today, that's precisely what Thompson does – and has been doing since he graduated from New York Law School in 2005. After working as an associate for a couple of firms over the first five years of his career, he and his dad founded TLO-Law, or Thompson Law Offices, based in Burlingame, where he and his team specialize in catastrophic injury cases as well as sexual abuse and assault cases in California, New York, Colorado and Missouri.

Right out of the gate, Thompson worked on some of the most high-profile cases in the Bay Area, and secured eight-figure settlements for victims' families and survivors of the San Bruno pipeline explosion that killed 84 people and leveled an entire neighborhood in 2010; the Ghost Ship warehouse fire in Oakland that killed 36 people in 2016; and survivors of deadly, PG&E-caused wildfires. Also, among those high-impact results are tens of millions of dollars in awards for sexual assault and sexual abuse victims, including a collective $50 million for survivors of assaults by massage therapists and nearly $9 million against schools in abuse cases involving children.

### Midwest to coast to coast

Born and raised in Kansas City, Missouri, Thompson majored in political science at the University of Colorado in Boulder, where he met his future wife. After they graduated, the couple moved to New York City. "Which is where I went to law school and practiced for a few years," Thompson said, referring to his stint with Gary B. Pillersdorf and Associates, yet another connection he made through an AAJ conference. "And then my wife and I moved back to the Bay Area, which is where she's from originally.

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We moved back here in 2006, and I started my legal career and we started a family out here."

Before opening TLO Law, Thompson worked for nearly five years at a large San Francico firm, where he was a senior associate and worked in defense for about a year – and "hated it." But it was all part of a plan to eventually launch his own plaintiffs' practice.

While he started off with routine personal-injury cases such as car accidents and slip-and-falls, once Thompson started working in the sexual abuse and sexual assault arena it opened his eyes to what a prolific problem it is even to this day and how survivors need guidance seeking justice.

"I think that just really opened my mind to helping them, not just in their civil case, seeking justice, but also providing other resources for them to heal and try to turn the page on being a victim," he explained. "Becoming a survivor is a way to heal. I'm proud to say that my firm is really good at holistically helping our clients, not just with their civil case, but with their lives."

## Approach and strategy

Like many plaintiffs' firms, TLO Law operates as if every case it accepts is going to trial, so trial preparation and discovery starts immediately, Thompson said. That's first and foremost in what he describes as a three-pronged approach.

Number two is being aggressive with discovery – getting the documents, components and testimony needed – and not allowing the defense to pull the trigger on any ploys. Defense lawyers always will try to obstruct and delay, play games and hide as much as they can, Thompson said. "They're counting on us being lazy," he said. "So, we want to have enough time to call them out in front of the court and get things that we need."

The third part of the firm's approach goes beyond the legal necessities, the burden of proof that the law requires. It's the proof that the jurors need, which is not the same as the legal proof, Thompson said. The jurors are thinking about what evidence they would want to hear or see in the case if they were the ones on trial, he said, so he and his team will bring in focus groups to find out whether their instincts are correct about what the jurors are looking for.

"That's something we always do when we're trying cases, and we try to do it early, sometimes in the beginning of a case, before we even start discovery," he said. "If you do it too late, sometimes you're not able to go back and do that next deposition that would have been really important for some jurors, or get that document or that video that the jurors wanted to see. We need to know what the jurors, with all their biases and prejudice, really want to hear, so that we can present it to them and cast our case in its best light."

On a personal level, when Thompson is going to trial, his approach is quite simple: Just be Bobby Thompson. Sincerity and honesty and authenticity are crucial to his success in the courtroom, he said. If he were to go in and try to be someone he's not, he knows he'll come across as fake, and that threatens his credibility with the jury. So, he goes in as a straightforward, friendly, polite Midwesterner like he's been doing his entire life.

"That part of me is never going to go away," he said. "That's who I try to be when I'm in front of a jury and talking to them. Hopefully, some of that will come across to some people as, 'This guy might be a plaintiffs' lawyer, but you know what's coming out of his mouth is not (BS).'

"I am a firm believer that the most credible person in the room is going to win, and most defense lawyers are just incapable of being the most trustworthy person in the room because they lie," Thomson continued. "So, I just try to give the information to the jury that they need in the most time-efficient manner because I know they want to get home to their families."

**REDIRECT:**

**Getaway Spot:** Back deck with family and friends
**Go-To Music or Artist:** Wilco
**Recommended Reading:** Anything by David Eggars
**Dream Job:** National Geographic photographer
**Words to Live By:** "Peaks and valleys. Peaks and valleys."

## Honors and down time

Along with his membership in AAJ, Thompson also is a board member with the Consumer Attorneys of California, a past president of the San Mateo County Trial Lawyers Association and a member in the San Francisco Trial Lawyers Association and Public Justice. He was honored in 2023 as SMCTLA's Trial Lawyer of the Year and in 2022 as a finalist for CAOC's Trial Lawyer of the Year.

When Thompson is not calling out defense lawyers in the courtroom, he stays as active as possible. He earned his pilot's license, is an avid tennis player and stays involved with his two teenagers – that slew of activities on the plates of an eighth grader and a high-school junior. Much of his down time, he said, is spent with family and friends.

The first piece of advice he would pass along to younger lawyers or law students is to connect with experienced attorneys who can guide them through the wild first four or five years of their career. Thompon said he had three "amazing" mentors who helped him, and he wouldn't be where he is today without them.

Then he segued into a military analogy.

"Another thing I would tell them is to look at what they're doing with the mentality of a Marine," he said. "The Marines are a small force designed to take on a much larger force. And the Marines typically kick ass and take names. So, we're plaintiffs' lawyers, and we're small firms, and we've got an inventory of cases. And for each one of those cases, there's two or three defense lawyers who are

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billing by the hour and whose sole job is to make our lives miserable and jam us up. So, if you take a caseload of 20 cases, you're fighting 40 different armies with law firms that are trying to make you lose. You have to be strategic and prepared – and overly prepared – to win that fight just like a Marine."

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