

RENÉ TORRADO

Practicing the Art of Commercial Litigation

by Olivia Clarke

René A. Torrado, Jr. became a lawyer because he has always seen himself as an advocate.

While the excitement and variety keep the job interesting, it's the personal contact with clients that he most enjoys.

"When I do the injury work, you're dealing with people who have frequently gone through a horrible disaster," said Torrado,

59, who became a trial lawyer in 1975 and has worked at Corboy & Demetrio since 2003. "I just derive a great deal of personal satisfaction out of dealing with people in those situations and helping them cope with the disaster that's befallen them, but also helping them deal with the legal system and helping them to recover just compensation for their injuries."

Torrado, who grew up in Miami Beach and attended the University of Notre Dame and Georgetown University Law Center, began his legal career as a law clerk for U.S. District Judge James Lawrence King in the Southern District of Florida.

He participated in the U.S. Department of Justice Honors Program as a trial attorney in the antitrust division and as a special assistant U.S. attorney in the Eastern District of Virginia.

He worked for a small Washington, D.C. firm before moving to Chicago in 1981 and working for Reuben & Proctor. In late 1985, Torrado and another Reuben & Proctor partner left to set up their own small firm. In mid-1987, he joined Vedder, Price, Kaufman & Kammholz.

Vedder Price Chairman Bob Stucker, who worked with Torrado for about 25 years, said Torrado handled a number of litigation matters for Stucker's corporate clients, and the clients were regularly impressed with his trial strategy.

"I think René is blessed with certain abilities and instincts that make him a terrific trial lawyer, and that particular skill is more an art than a science," Stucker said. "Either you have those innate talents or you don't,



and he seems to have those talents to a large degree and that is why he is so effective.”

One of Torrado’s most memorable cases while at Vedder Price was *Zdeb, et al. vs. Baxter International, Inc., et al.* He represented an inventor who created a portable infuser that infused chemotherapy for cancer patients.

A company planned to enter into a lucrative licensing agreement with the inventor, but decided to first contact the inventor’s previous employer, Baxter International, to confirm that Baxter had no claims on the invention. “Baxter wrote a letter to the company saying the inventor incorporated Baxter technology,” Torrado said.

The inventor said that was false and sued Baxter, claiming it “wrongfully interfered with a prospective business opportunity,” he said.

The case went to trial in September 1996 in the Cook County Circuit Court. “A jury ruled in the inventor’s favor, and by the time it went through the appellate system, the judgment had reached about \$9.8 million,” he said.

“This was just one of those cases where I really believed very strongly in my client and my client’s cause,” he said.

Another memorable case was *Heller Financial, Inc. v. Grammco Computer Sales and Donald B. Grammer*, which went to trial in the U.S. District Court for the Western District of Texas in San Antonio in September 1993.

His client, Heller Financial, alleged that Donald Grammer, the principal owner of Grammco, fraudulently induced Heller to lend Grammco over \$3 million based on Grammer’s misrepresentations about the ownership of the computer equipment that was collateral for the loan.

Heller charged that Grammer bribed the employee, who was in charge of the Santa Rosa Medical Center’s computer leasing activities, to get the medical center to lease its computers from Grammco. The case was tried on claims that the defendants violated the Racketeer Influenced Corrupt Organizations Act or RICO, committed

common law fraud, and breached the defendants’ lending agreement with Heller.

After a three-week trial, a jury ruled in Heller’s favor and awarded the company about \$20 million. The U.S. Court of Appeals for the Fifth Circuit reduced the amount of the judgment to about \$6 million, which included attorneys’ fees.

“What made the case fascinating was the characters involved in the case, and it was an interesting fact pattern,” he said.

Torrado describes himself as the type of lawyer who likes to take on causes, a philosophy that Corboy & Demetrio shares.

He joined Corboy & Demetrio in 2003 after his Notre Dame roommate Thomas Demetrio asked him to help start a commercial litigation practice modeled after the firm’s personal injury practice. The firm takes each commercial litigation case on a contingent fee basis, just as the firm handles its personal injury cases.

“In developing a commercial trial practice at Corboy & Demetrio, our goal is to make available to persons or companies involved in commercial disputes that which our firm does best: We try lawsuits,” he said.

“Because our lawyers try cases before juries on a regular basis, we have had to develop the ability to take seemingly complex concepts, like those found in product liability cases, aviation cases and medical malpractice cases, and explain those concepts in terms that jurors can understand. Corboy & Demetrio’s track record of excellent results obtained for injured persons and families speaks volumes about our lawyers’ skills in talking to juries. These are precisely the type of skills that we bring to the table in a commercial case.”

“Torrado has excellent people skills, a strong work ethic, and a deep love for the law,” said firm president and main partner Thomas Demetrio.

“He’s a great lawyer, but he is a better person,” Demetrio said. “René is the most sincere, kind friend anyone can ever have.”

Torrado said he really enjoys working with his personal injury clients, but it often means dealing with emotional death-related cases.

“Handling personal injury cases can be challenging,” he said, “because a lawyer must try to make sure that you can provide support to the families in terms of emotional support and help them sort things out because ultimately at the end of the day, nobody can bring their loved one back. It’s really a matter of compensating the family in the only way the law knows how to do that, and that is in dollars.”

He tries to practice his profession with certain principles. “The most effective lawyers are those who are tough and vigorous but do not take shots at opposing counsel,” he said.

“I try to argue fairly vigorously, and yet I’ve always felt very strongly that as vigorously as I might argue, the battle is not between me and the other lawyer,” he said. “The dispute is between our clients, and I try to be a gentleman about it.”

Besides his legal work, Torrado has held several public positions. From 1988 to 1995, he was general counsel for the Chicago Bar Association and was its president from 1995 to 1996. In addition, he was president of the Center for Conflict Resolution from 1997 to 2000.

When he’s not working, he enjoys traveling with his wife of 36 years to places like southern Africa or southwest Costa Rica because they like exploring jungles and rainforests.

It appears that becoming a lawyer may run in the family.

His 32-year-old son, René A. Torrado, III, graduated from law school this year and is preparing to take the bar exam. His 29-year-old daughter, Nicole M. Torrado, works for the Cook County State’s Attorney’s Office in the juvenile division, and her husband is a Vedder Price lawyer.

“I love being a lawyer,” Torrado said. “There may have been slow times in the early years of practice, but during the last 24 or 25 years it has just been amazing. It’s been a lot of work, but it’s been a lot of fun. I’ve been pretty darn lucky.” ■