

FLIP CORBOY

Defining His Own Version of Reputable Name

by Olivia Clarke

It means a lot to Philip “Flip” Harnett Corboy Jr. when clients choose him and his firm during what may be the worst time in their entire lives.

“Every time I meet a new client, I’m really proud that they want to hire me,” he says.

Corboy works as a partner at **Corboy & Demetrio P.C.**, a personal injury law firm that has acquired at least \$3 billion in settlements and verdicts, nearly 600 in excess of \$1 million. The firm employs 17 lawyers and 48 staff members.

Corboy has settled or tried at least 50 cases in which plaintiffs recovered \$1 million or more. These included a \$22.5 million settlement in 2011 for the family of a woman who was killed as a result of the derailment of a train in Rockford that was carrying dozens of Canadian National Railway cars filled with ethanol. Others include an \$18 million settlement for a Mexican national killed by a piece of falling glass from Chicago’s CNA Tower and a \$16.7 million verdict for a pedestrian who was brain-damaged in a collision with an automobile.

More recently, in March of 2013, he obtained an \$8 million verdict for the family of a wife and mother who was killed by a truck on the shoulder of I-294 as she investigated a flat tire.

Corboy handles between 12 and 15 cases himself and supervises another 30 to 35. An early riser, he likes getting to the office by 7 a.m. to answer letters, listen to messages, handle discovery, and read about cases before the office gets busy. But by 9 a.m., the phone is ringing.

“I don’t think I’ve had a day in a long time where a new case didn’t call in,” says Corboy, 62. “On the sizable cases, if I’m not doing a deposition or working on a motion, then I’ve got to be talking to experts. This has become a very expert-driven law practice. It’s not only about what they know but also how they communicate it.”

In the local and national legal world, the last name Corboy resonates with trial lawyers, in part because of Corboy’s father, Phil Sr., a legendary personal injury lawyer who trained many of today’s lawyers in his practice area.

Flip Corboy has not only carried on that

reputation, but also built on it and improved the firm his father created. He’s firmly established his own identity now, but he almost didn’t become a lawyer.

Born in 1950, he grew up in Rogers Park until he and his family moved to Skokie. He attended St. Joan of Arc and graduated from Cranwell boarding school in Western Massachusetts in the late 1960s.

While in high school, he volunteered as a delegation aide at the 1968 Democratic Convention and worked for the Arkansas delegation. He then began his college career at Villanova University and by his second year he became very interested in politics and government.

“I remember being blown away by a young congressman from New York’s Long Island named Allard Lowenstein who came to Villanova in the early fall of 1970 to speak about his dream for America,” he says. “I decided to spend the rest of the fall leading up to the election in November driving up to Long Island to do whatever I could to help his campaign.... In the end, he lost re-election. But it didn’t sour me on politics. It just made me more interested in winning.”

Sitting at History’s Right Hand

After graduating from Villanova, Corboy worked in the U.S. Senate as an elevator operator.

“The best part of it was meeting all of the senators at the time—Ted Kennedy, Hubert Humphrey, Sam Ervin, Edward Brooke, Barry Goldwater, Ted Shriver, Marlow Cook,” he says. “All were very genuine politicians who remembered my name and always asked how I was doing. I learned very quickly how much personal appeal works at the highest level of government.”

When Watergate hit Capitol Hill in 1974, Corboy was working for Rep. Morgan Murphy from Chicago. He got the opportunity to watch the House Judiciary Committee conduct President Richard M. Nixon’s impeachment proceedings just a few feet from the chairman’s seat.

He planned to attend law school and then

return to Washington, D.C., to continue with his political aspirations. He attended DePaul University College of Law and during his second year, he ran into Murphy at a bar. The congressman introduced Corboy to Ray Smith, a criminal law attorney looking to hire a law clerk. Corboy didn’t want to become a criminal lawyer, but Smith convinced him that it would be a good learning experience.

“I found out he was one of the superstars in the criminal defense bar,” he says. “He introduced me to gangsters, politicians, CEOs. He did some top-notch lawyering.”

He graduated from law school in 1977 and worked for another well-known criminal defense attorney, George Cotsirilos. But Cotsirilos convinced him that his next stop needed to be the Cook County State’s Attorney’s Office. With Cotsirilos’ help, Corboy started working there in 1978.

“I was sworn in by Bill Kunkle in his office at 26th Street and California on his lunch break during the run-up to the John Wayne Gacy case,” Corboy says. “There were hundreds of photos from Gacy’s home on the Northwest Side where he had victimized and murdered what turned out to be 33 boys and young men. I looked at the photos and thought this was going to be a fascinating job.”

But after Kunkle swore him in, he just as quickly assigned Corboy to traffic court. Corboy says many new lawyers in the office worked in appeals, where they remained in an office writing briefs. Traffic court meant he could try cases and get the trial experience he wanted so the assignment pleased him.

“Slowly you work your way up to trying murders and all sorts of serious felonies,” Corboy says. “It was probably the greatest job I could have ever hoped for at that time in my career. The people were fantastic. If you were responsible and diligent and had talent, the opportunities were immeasurable. You didn’t have any limits on how high you could go if you were talented and kept at it.

“I’ve met so many people in that office that have had an impact on my life. There are people who will be lifelong friends.”

Corboy’s father was best friends with Bob



Cooney. The families vacationed together and the Corboy and Cooney families grew up together. Cooney also had a son in the state's attorney's office, and when Bob's son, John, planned to leave the office in 1983, he said he wanted to try a murder case with Flip Corboy, who was a "first chair" at the time.

They found a good case to work on together. Cooney would do the opening and closing, while Corboy would do the rebuttal.

Unbeknownst to the sons, their fathers sneaked into the courtroom to see their sons in action. The public defender's office knew they would be there and after Cooney's closing, the public defender's office said it would waive its closing arguments. So, Corboy did not get to do his rebuttal.

Bob Cooney joked with his best friend, Phil Corboy Sr., and said, "My son scared the shit out of him and he didn't want to give his closing."

But Flip Corboy says he remembers his father saying the defense attorney was scared to death of Flip's rebuttal argument. The truth lies probably somewhere in between, he says. Needless to say, Corboy was disappointed he didn't get his chance to do his rebuttal.

'You Can't Beat Up a Nun'

But he says he'll always remember his first jury trial, a misdemeanor battery case in traffic

court in the late 1970s. A group of Nazis marched in Marquette Park and a girl from the Jewish Defense League came to protest the Nazis. She got into a fight with a Nazi and the police intervened. She hit a police officer, who arrested her for battery.

"She ended up enlisting the help of really talented, experienced trial lawyers to represent her. They wanted a jury trial," he says. "I was nervous as hell. Everything you learn in trial advocacy you throw out the window. They were bombarding me with pretrial motions and it was just me."

The defense brought forward three witnesses, three nuns who testified that they did not see the girl hit the police officer, he says.

"The first witnesses I get to cross-examine are nuns," he says. "I went to Catholic schools. Meanwhile, the jury is practically laughing. You can't beat up a nun in front of a jury. That was a quick not guilty."

After working in the office for seven years, he woke up one day and started getting ready for a murder trial with the realization that it was time to move on.

Uncertain of his next step, he interviewed for a position in the U.S. Attorney's Office in Southern California near his then-girlfriend and then got asked back for a second interview.

He wasn't sure if he wanted to leave behind

the career he'd built in Chicago. At about the same time, he received a call from attorney Tom Demetrio asking him if he wanted to come join him and Corboy's father.

"I had this terrific relationship with (my father) and we liked doing things together," he says. "But I knew his reputation—that he was difficult to work with. I'm not talking out of school here.

"I didn't want the relationship of father-son to be changed to include employer-employee. But Tom convinced me to try it for a year and if it didn't work out, I was, of course, free to do and go somewhere different."

He started at the firm on Aug. 1, 1985, sat down with his father to discuss how their relationships would proceed, and has been there ever since.

"All the fears I got nervous about never came to fruition," Corboy says. "We sat down at the beginning and I told him to treat me the same as everyone else. And, No. 2, we will try to find a case to try together.

"I had been in the state's attorney's office and I didn't know everything there was, but I knew how to try a case. I had to learn the civil side. It would take me a while to learn the culture of civil practice in Chicago. I knew in a short period of time that I could pick it up and so did he."

Finding a case to try together proved

challenging because they both could demonstrate large egos, he says. But they finally found one that they determined would

evidence without needing to take dozens and dozens of depositions, he says. Jurors, particularly younger jurors, exhibit a shorter

client is pretty much stuck with what you are able to get for them.”

Clients sometimes are not the best communicators. That means a lawyer must spend a lot of time with them to learn their stories and how best to convey those stories, he says.

“We have doctors who talk about the problems orthopedically,” he says. “But to talk about what’s going on in a man’s mind and in his soul—to not be able to use his legs, to not be able to throw a football with his son, to not be able to walk down the aisle for his daughter’s wedding...you have to remember it’s their story and not yours and sometimes you’ve got to draw it out of them.”

Cook County Circuit Judge Elizabeth Budzinski says she’s known Corboy professionally for about 20 years. She describes him as an excellent trial lawyer who acts professionally and civilly.

“He’s very polished,” she says. “The technology they use during trials is great. He thoroughly works up a case. He’s a strong advocate for his client. He’s active. He’s involved. He’s very charitable.”

Richard Devine, former Cook County state’s attorney and current partner at Meckler, Bulger, Tilson, Marick & Pearson, says he first met Corboy when he coached high school basketball and Corboy was a student.

“I’ve always found him to be competitive in the right sense of the word, going back to high school,” Devine says. “He’s an achiever and someone who set goals for himself. I was not surprised when he turned out to be a lawyer.”

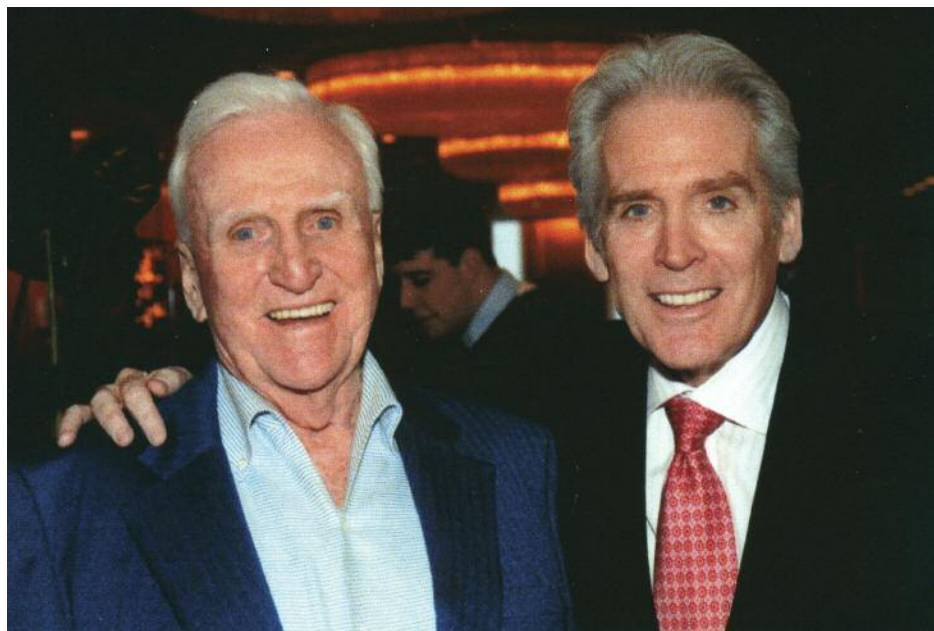
They crossed paths again in the state’s attorney’s office. Devine says Corboy impressed him because he wanted to learn the skills of being a lawyer in an environment separate from where his father worked.

They both serve on U.S. Sen. Richard Durbin’s committee that reviews federal judicial candidates. Devine says Corboy shows very good judgment, a sense of fairness in how he reviews the candidates, and a deep desire to find the best people for the bench.

As an example of Corboy’s dedication to his craft, Devine recalled meeting with Corboy when Devine was running for state’s attorney. Corboy needed to take a call from opposing counsel and didn’t ask Devine to step out of the room.

Devine says he noticed then just how skilled Corboy was.

“I remember the back and forth with the defense attorney and I was impressed with how he cut through all the issues,” Devine says. “He got to the heart of what the dispute was to resolve and settle the case through that conversation.”



Corboy and his father, the late Philip H. Corboy Sr. The two were partners at the firm the elder Corboy formed.

go to trial. They split up the jury selection duties, his father planned to do the opening and he would take the closing.

But the day the case was scheduled to start, the defense called with a settlement offer that was in the best interest of the client. He said he is sad that he never had another chance to try a case with his father.

Robert Bingle, managing partner of Corboy & Demetrio, says he started at the firm in 1983 and has known Corboy since he started two years later. Bingle describes Corboy as a true partner with whom he often works on cases.

A Single-Minded Optimist

Bingle says Corboy is very organized in the sense that he likes to methodically plot out each aspect of the case to develop a strategy.

“He is very single-minded,” Bingle says. “Among all of my partners, Flip is always the most optimistic as to what our perspective is and what our goal is and what the challenges are that face us. He’ll say, ‘We can do it. That’s not a problem.’ He will point out how we will get around a particular obstacle or case.”

Over the years, Corboy says, he’s seen the number of jury trials decrease due to settlements, arbitration, and mediation.

“It seems that the insurance industry has convinced a lot of people that if they mediate more cases, it is much better and more cost effective,” he says.

Social media and technology, such as cameras in nearly every phone, uncover more

attention span. When an expert takes the stand, he or she must make their explanations short and simple. Using video and tangible exhibits often helps.

When asked to name a few cases that affected his career, he references Les Harris. Harris was working as a laborer in the construction of a chemical processing tank at the Henkel Inc. facility in Kankakee in 1990 when a 600-pound boom supported by a forklift fell off of the truck. It landed on his back and made him a paraplegic.

“You could tell the first time you met him what a charming man he was,” Corboy says. “He had a wonderful approach to life. He wasn’t bitter. I was amazed by what a wonderful outlook he had.”

In September 1998, a jury awarded him \$7.7 million. Harris loved to play golf and told Corboy that he would use a portion of the money to get an expensive golf cart that helps paraplegic golfers continue to play.

Throughout his career, Corboy has seen the results of horrific injuries and disasters.

“You have to be conscious of the fact that you never want to be numb to it. You never want to be cynical about it,” he says. “These people come to you because they are in the worst episode of their life and they need you and you’ve got to respect that. You’ve got to treat it very, very seriously and dedicate all of your waking moments to making sure that they get the fairest and best trial in the world. ...Once this case is by and large over, your

'Be Aware of Surroundings'

Corboy is no stranger to tragedy.

An out-of-control motorist killed his youngest brother, Robert, at age 12. His sister, Cook County Circuit Judge Joan Corboy, was fatally injured in an accident on vacation in 1999. His mother died after a long battle with cancer.

Losing two of his siblings in tragedies, he says, "makes me even more fearful that that will happen to me or, more importantly, my children. ...I'm in a good position to see that sometimes bad things happen, No. 1, to good people and, No. 2, to people not prepared. Be aware of your surroundings. Always presume that cars are always going to win the contest between car and pedestrian."

Family remains very important to him, even if some of the early details remain in dispute. According to his memory, he met his wife, Margaret Shields Corboy, in 1993. According to hers, it was 1991. She says they met at a party, but he says they got introduced at a bar when he met up with friends after a long day at the office.

They have two children. Seventeen-year-old Juliette is a three-time All-American and three-time All-State diver. She is a junior at New Trier High School. Ryan Patrick is a 16-year-old student at North Shore Country Day School who plays football and baseball.

When Corboy met his wife she was working in France. He promised her when they got married that she would not forget France and

was young. I never thought as a young man that society would be the way it is today. I'm very proud of their successes."

A couple of years ago, he promised his son they would take a very special trip together. This past summer, they went on a six-day, five-night kayaking expedition in Alaska.

"It was cool hanging out with my son," he says. "We talked a lot. ...The first couple days, I was nervous about bears. I'm basically a big city kid. They give you bear spray and you go

and a good friend.

"When you're with Flip, you become a part of his life," Bingle says. "Not only is he is a wonderful partner, but he is even a better friend. Friendships are very important to Flip."

Corboy volunteers and works with a number of legal and social organizations. For example, he's been on the Board of Directors of the Legal Assistance Foundation (LAF) since 1997 and was its president from 2008 to 2010. He was also the president of the Illinois Trial



From left: Son Ryan Patrick; wife Margaret; daughter Juliette; and Corboy.



Corboy kayaking in Alaska on a trip with his son in 2012.

they would visit often. The entire family tries to visit France once a year and his wife and children speak fluent French.

He loves spending time with his family and going to his children's different sporting events.

"It is fun watching the world through their eyes," he says. "It is so different than when I

through informal training, but you still stay scared. I just imagined what it would be like if he got hurt and I had to bring him home. I said I'd rather a bear eat me than hurt my son and have to face my wife. She jokingly, but seriously, told me to do what you've got to do."

Bingle describes Corboy as a family man

Lawyers Association during the same time.

"He's just been terrific," says Diana White, executive director of the LAF. "He's interested in what's going on with us. He cares about the plight of poor people who need a lawyer but can't afford to hire one. He is a good fundraiser. He's politically savvy. He has great enthusiasm. He is willing to promote LAF at his firm and with his colleagues and acquaintances.

"He's a very hard worker and he's just a thoroughly nice guy. If you're his friend, you are his friend forever. He is a loyal person and never forgets about the little guy."

When asked what he hopes people understand about him as a lawyer, Corboy says, "That I care. I'm not really here because my dad started a nice law firm. I had to work to get where I am. I play by the rules and my partners and colleagues respect me for that. I love what I am doing. I'm appreciative of the opportunity that I have here and I never forget that.

"I came to realize early on in my career that it is about nothing else but the clients. You won't have clients very long if you don't understand that they are the most important part of the practice of law. ...It never gets old and it never gets boring. I never see myself retiring." ■