

BOB BINGLE

Forging Lifelong Friendships Through Passionate Representation

by Maria Kantzavelos

In an instant, on Aug. 4, 1982, Nick Hernandez's life as he knew it would never again be the same.

He was an athlete, heading into his senior year of high school at Joliet Catholic Academy, with aspirations of playing professional baseball or entering the Air Force Academy on a scholarship after graduation.

That night, Hernandez was driving home from a friend's house along 143rd Street near State Street in Lockport, when two horses that had escaped from a nearby corral appeared suddenly before him in the road.

Hernandez remembers slamming on the breaks, striking one of the horses and possibly clipping the other. The mare landed on the roof of the car, crushing the teen's neck and rendering him a quadriplegic.

"It was one of those one-in-a-million shots," Hernandez recalls. "Unfortunately for me, I was in the wrong place at the wrong time."

But there has been a constant since that life-changing night for Hernandez, who is now 44 and performs occasional clerical work for a financial firm. That constant is the personal injury lawyer who represented him shortly after the accident in his lawsuit against the owners of the horses.

Today, long after the suit was settled, Robert J. Bingle of **Corboy & Demetrio PC** has maintained a lasting friendship with his former client, who was just 17 when they met. Decades later, the plaintiff's personal injury lawyer still keeps in touch, Hernandez says—whether it's with get-togethers over pizza and a few beers, to share in a football game on television (both are University of Notre Dame fans), or with regular phone calls to catch up with Hernandez and his family.

"That should tell you something about Bob right there," Hernandez says. "He's the real deal—one of the most genuine human beings I know. And that's saying a lot, coming from me."

"To maintain such a close relationship...It's really unique," he says. "In a way, I do consider him like a big brother. There's, really, nothing I can't talk to him about."



Personal, Direct, Emotional

For Bingle, clients like Hernandez keep him grounded in an area of law he finds fulfilling

because it "deals with people's lives."

"It's very simple and clear to me," Bingle says. "I lucked into one of the areas of law—the

one for sure—that is the most personal, direct and emotional area of law that you can be in.”

In his 27-year-long law career, all of it spent at Corboy & Demetrio, the Chicago plaintiff’s personal injury law firm that took him in after he graduated in the early 1980s from Loyola University Chicago School of Law, Bingle has handled hundreds of personal injury and wrongful death cases—of all types.

A past president of the Illinois Trial Lawyers Association, Bingle serves as managing partner at Corboy & Demetrio.

Outside the legal profession, he volunteers in community activities, including the Big Brothers/Big Sisters of Metropolitan Chicago, Fenwick High School in Oak Park, and Christ the King Jesuit College Preparatory School in Chicago.

At the law firm, his roster of cases includes aviation litigation, construction negligence and medical negligence, premises liability and product liability, and railroad negligence and vehicular negligence.

“He can handle complex matters of any nature or kind; he has the intellectual versatility,” says defense attorney Glen E. Amundsen, chairman of Smith Amundsen, who has opposed Bingle on cases. “I’ve seen him go from case to case on different things. He understands how to take complex things and sort of distill them down to their core facts—the things that are persuasive, the things that would be important to people on a jury. And I think he could do that no matter what kind of case it is.”

With most of his cases resulting in out-of-court settlements, Bingle estimates that he has taken about 40 to trial and verdict.

The types of injuries in the cases he has handled run the gamut, from a fractured ankle in a fall-down “all the way up to a traffic control person on Clark and Jackson who gets hit by a car and fractures a femur,” Bingle says. “Then, somebody may be in a terrible accident and loses a leg or a limb...”

He readily recalls the names of his former clients. Like Aji John, who was driving along Route 80 near LaSalle-Peru on a cross country trip from California to Montreal to visit his sister when he was struck by a truck and lost his arm in the accident. Or Ron Ziarko, a truck driver who was picking up a trailer in a railroad yard near O’Hare field when a train struck his cab. Ziarko was pinned under the front wheels of his trailer and lost his left leg.

“If you go down the tollway south of O’Hare, and then you see what they call a ‘piggy back yard’ where they put all the truck containers, that’s where Ronny Ziarko got hurt,” Bingle says. “I go by it all the time. Whenever I go by it, I always think of Ron.”

There are the clients like Hernandez who

come to Bingle after accidents that resulted in serious and permanent injuries, including paralysis. And there are clients who suffered severe brain injuries.

“Those are terrible cases because they just change a person’s life so much,” Bingle says.

The most difficult are the death cases.

Bingle was the lead plaintiff’s counsel in the litigation stemming from the Fox River Grove school bus tragedy in 1995, when a train collided with a school bus, leaving seven Cary-Grove High School students dead and 21 others injured. The 27 lawsuits resulted in a \$27.3 million settlement.

“It was awful,” Bingle says, referring to the collision. “They saw the train coming right at them. The bus was parked on the tracks, and there was nothing they could do. I got to know those families very well, too: The Clark family, the Kalte and the Fulham families, and several of the students.

“In the death cases, even though they want justice, you know they’re sitting there saying: ‘God I wish I was never here. I wish I had never met you, Bob, that my son or daughter was alive and in college.’”

What keeps him going through all the sadness is knowing that his practice area

and all the resources we have, to get you justice. And justice in the American civil justice system is a monetary award.”

It Helps to Say, ‘It’s Over’

For Bingle, the work doesn’t necessarily stop once the case is resolved. “Being a lawyer also means being a counselor,” he says, even when it comes to the things people decide to do with an award he secured through a settlement or verdict. In those cases, Bingle says he is often there to help guide clients to the right resources for help.

Or, he is there long after the suit has settled to support clients in their efforts to direct an award toward a particular cause or program. That’s the case with Paul and Linda Demo, also former clients whom Bingle considers his friends. The couple’s daughter, Melissa Cook, was killed in the March 2002 scaffolding collapse at the John Hancock Center.

Weighing several tons, the scaffold platform fell from the building’s 42nd floor onto Chestnut Street near Michigan Avenue. The platform crushed the car with Linda Demo, 29-year-old Melissa, a friend of Demo’s, and the friend’s daughter, Jill Nelson, 27. Demo and her friend survived, but the impact killed Cook



Bingle and family celebrate his daughter Meggie’s graduation from Boston College last year. From left: Son Bobby, daughters Colleen and Meggie, Bingle, and wife, Maureen.

gives him the opportunity to use the law as a vehicle to help people through difficult times.

“I’m helping them financially, ultimately, and that is the most direct way. If, as a result of what we do, some societal change might happen—that’s great. But that’s not what you’re hiring me to do,” Bingle says. “You’re hiring me and our firm, and all of my partners,

and Nelson, who were in the driver’s and front passenger seats.

Bingle worked up the damages portion of the complex litigation in the case of the catastrophic scaffolding collapse, which killed three women and injured and traumatized several other people. The case, which brought together lawyers representing 13 plaintiffs, 14 defendants,

and more than two dozen insurance carriers, resulted in a \$75.2 million global settlement.

The Demo couple, Bingle says, used their portion of the settlement to build a softball stadium in their daughter's memory at University of Notre Dame. Bingle was with his former clients for the groundbreaking and dedication last spring. The couple also started a foundation that provides college scholarships for financially disadvantaged students around the country.

Bingle hopes that, in some way, his work can help to bring closure to people who have survived tragic losses.

"I think, sometimes, when a case finally does resolve itself, there is a certain amount of closure to it. It does help to kind of say: 'It's over, now we have to go on with our life.' ...As if you ever go on," says Bingle, the father of two daughters and a son, all of them college age.

"When you lose a child, I think you just go through the motions a lot for the rest of your life. A big chunk of you is just gone," Bingle says. "That's my impression, after dealing for 27 years with people that have lost children. They can enjoy life, and they do things, but part of it is gone, and never, ever will be replaced."

Dan L. Boho, a partner in Hinshaw & Culbertson LLP, has opposed Bingle in many cases.

"When you meet him, you think he's just a happy, genial guy," Boho says. "He's exactly like that in front of the jury. He is a fierce competitor, but he's got a genial way about him that makes him a really tough opponent. He's got all the skills, but he's also got that engaging personality at the same time.

"He's real; he's credible. And so, people like him and they trust him."

Boho was among the defense attorneys in the Hancock scaffolding case.

"Bob's handling of that case is very emblematic of him as a whole," Boho says. "The tragedy that happened to the clients and families in that case, Bob identified with very much. He did a great job in bringing the details and the feelings out in a very palpable way.

"He has tremendous empathy for others. He's able to take that and paint a picture of the true suffering felt by the families," Boho continues. "There's something about really getting into the damages end, and feeling it, and having that tremendous empathy that make some people so much better. While all plaintiff's lawyers endeavor to do that, some are better than others. And Bob is as good as they come."

Thomas W. Cushing, senior trial counsel in the law department of the Union Pacific Railroad Co., opposed Bingle in the case of the Fox River Grove bus-train collision.

"In terms of negotiating the case, Bob was

always very straightforward. It was never something where he put something out there, then went back on it. He put his word on it, and we knew it was good," Cushing says.

"I knew he'd see the people aspect of it," says Latherow, who knew Bingle from his early years at Corboy & Demetrio before he founded his own firm, Latherow Law Office.



Bingle, center, with partners Tom Demetrio, left, and Flip Corboy.

"Bob Bingle was one of the primary reasons that case did settle."

Cushing has known Bingle, 58, for more than 20 years, having opposed him in many railroad cases.

"Bob is too young to be referred to as 'old school,' but his approach is old school—where you treat each other within the legal community as part of a fraternity of officers of the court. He is respectful. If someone is playing games with him, he's going to throw down the gauntlet. But he's not one to play games in litigation."

In fact, Bingle "was always mindful that it was easier to get things done with honey than it was with vinegar," says Cook County Circuit Judge Thomas Hogan, who has seen Bingle in action from the bench and from the opposing side when the jurist was in private practice.

Hogan calls Bingle "a zealous advocate on behalf of his client who never forgets that there's a human on the other side of the case."

When Jerry A. Latherow's nephew was killed with his friend 10 years ago in a railroad accident, Bingle was the lawyer Latherow called to handle the civil case.

"That's what his clients get to enjoy—that they're not just another case," Latherow says. "He puts a human face on it. It's not some story—it's real life. It's not a claim, it's not a case, it's not a lawsuit—it's a person's life."

'I Have to Get to Know the Family'

Getting to know the client and surviving family members in cases involving a wrongful death, Bingle says, is key to his work as a trial lawyer.

"I think that translates when you're talking to a jury," Bingle says. "If you're talking about somebody's daughter, and you're trying to convey to that jury what that meant to this mother and father who are sitting behind you in closing argument, I really have to get to know the family. And I certainly hope I bring to that argument, that presentation to that jury, the feeling of what they lost, of what it means. How can anybody do that, really, unless you've gone through it?"

He hasn't. But in his line of work, he gets up-close and personal with those who have experienced great tragedies and losses.

"I can't go on vacation without being or

seeing something that reminds me of a case. Either I'll go over a railroad crossing, and I'll see people parked on the tracks as they're waiting for a light to change, and I'll go, 'Oh my God—why are they doing that?' Or I'll go on an airplane and remember some of the airline cases I've worked on.

"It makes you very cautious and conscious of your world, and I suspect it also has probably sensitized me a little bit as to how blessed I am and how valuable life is," he says. "That's what strikes me so often in this business—how life can change just so quickly. You meet people, and one minute they're fine. And then they get the call at five o'clock in the morning, and they're wondering what happened to their son who fell off a porch that didn't have a proper railing on it, and he's dead. And they're driving up from Cincinnati, wondering if their child's alive."

His First Love: Teaching

Bingle was raised in Toledo, Ohio, one of five sons of the owner of a coffee company who died when Bingle was a high school senior. He didn't deliberately set out on a career path that would lead him to plaintiff's personal injury work.

"I think it was providential that I ended up here in this area," Bingle says. "More than anything else, it gives me the opportunity to provide for my family but also to help people. And that's what I really wanted to do with my life."

Perhaps, Bingle says, that is why his first love was teaching.

A 1973 graduate of University of Notre Dame, he had immersed himself in the university's liberal arts regimen rooted in the great books. In a desk drawer at his office, he keeps a yellowed sheet of paper from his college years with lists of scribbled and typed vocabulary words he likes to add to, words like "pedagogical," "disdain," "imperious," and "insouciant."

"I love words, and I love to learn words," Bingle says. "Of course, you have to be careful in front of juries. I might not use the word 'erudition' in front of a jury. I might say, 'This guy is very smart.' But I love the English language."

He also likes to collect favorite quotations. Like the one by St. Francis de Sales, which, he says, has become a sort of motto for him to live by: "There's nothing so strong as true gentleness and nothing so gentle as true strength."

"I think that's the way I approach life," Bingle says. "You don't have to be barreling through life, offending people. ... If I look back at my life, I've tried to be strong but gentle."

After college, Bingle was working at a punch press in a sign factory when he accepted an offer from his former high school teacher to teach freshman religion, sophomore American history, and senior English at the school.

After that teaching stint, he moved to Chicago to pursue a master's degree in education and the equivalent of a master's degree in American history. Soon, he started student teaching at St. Ignatius College Prep, a Catholic high school in Chicago's Near West Side.

Still unsure about a future career, he had met a secretary who worked with Catholic Charities, the non-profit social service organization he worked with as a volunteer for many years since, who suggested he'd have a knack for the hospitality business.

"I said, 'That sounds good to me,' because I like people. I'm good with people, I love dealing with people, and I love meeting them. And that's what the hotel business is—making people feel good while being in your establishment."

Through her connections, he landed a job in the sales department of Hilton Hotels Corporation, where he worked his way up the corporate ladder—as high as the position of director of sales at the Palmer House hotel, then a premier Hilton property.

At a point during that corporate ladder climb, he thought he'd give law a try and entered Loyola's night school program.

"Unlike a lot of people who say, 'I wanted to be a trial lawyer from the day I started law school,' I wanted to try law," Bingle says. "I thought, 'Well, it couldn't hurt me to go to law school, even if I stay with Hilton Hotels. I could be in their legal division or, if I'm in their corporate structure, it's not going to hurt to have a law degree.'"

During his third year of law school, he chose law over an offer to become the director of sales for the west coast operations of Hilton Hotels, "which, believe me, was not a bad job for a 30-year-old guy," says Bingle, who also did not want to leave Chicago and the woman he eventually married, Maureen.

"I figured, the hotel business is a very fluid business, and if I got out of law school and attempted law and didn't like it, a year or two later I'd jump right back into the hotel business," Bingle says. "But if I didn't try law, I would never really know whether or not I wanted to do it."

When a young man Bingle had previously taken under his wing at Hilton Hotels learned that his mentor was looking for a job in law, he sent him to his father and uncle.

"I wasn't versed in Chicago, so I didn't know all the ins and outs," Bingle recalls.

"The next day, I'm in the chambers of Judge Abraham Lincoln Marovitz, a famous federal district judge here in Chicago."

Marovitz, as it turned out, was the young man's uncle.

"Then, the next day, I was in Syd Marovitz's office," Bingle says, referring to the young man's father, who was a former park district

commissioner under former Chicago Mayor Richard J. Daley.

"When I walked into the office, with him was Mike Howlett Sr., the former lieutenant governor."

The next day, "I was sitting in front of [firm co-founder and name partner Philip H.] Corboy," Bingle says. "They had called and said, 'We got a guy—you should talk to him. He's a quick learner. He's somebody you should look at.'"

Thomas A. Demetrio, the other name partner at the firm, remembers the phone call.

"I can say, as it turned out, it was probably the best phone call I ever took," Demetrio says.

What Demetrio saw when he met Bingle was a fine trial lawyer in the making.

"His people skills were evident from day one; his intelligence was evident from day one," Demetrio says. "If I liked him, I knew a jury would like him."

And Bingle, Demetrio says, still has not changed his ways.

"His way with people is extraordinary. You meet Bob Bingle, you have an instant friend. He is not gregarious, but he's personality personified," Demetrio says. "He has a trait that all wonderful trial lawyers have, and that is his ability to focus on you and make you feel like you're the most important person in the world. However, in his case, it's true—he feels that way."

"He's just got a knack of ingratiating himself in a very good way. People just like being around Bob Bingle."

In the courtroom, Demetrio concedes, persuasiveness is a viable option only if the trial lawyer is credible.

"I know jurors sense if you believe in your cause," Demetrio says. "Bob's passion comes through."

Bingle may return to teaching one day, "at some inner-city, Catholic high school, for lunch money, if I'm blessed enough."

"But I certainly have been blessed so far," Bingle says. "I have a wonderful wife, who truly has been the reason I am where I am today."

And the "strong, but gentle" trial lawyer says he is far from ready to throw in the towel on a practice area that has always been the right fit for him.

"I want to keep working to the point where I can give the best closing argument that I can ever give, and I don't know if I've done it yet," Bingle says. "I still think I probably have it in me, and that's good—it keeps me going."

"I lucked out in being in this area of law, where you can really impact people's lives," Bingle says. "It may not happen in every case, but I've had the opportunity where I can actually say: 'Gee, we changed that person's life because we did a good job.' And that's nice." ■