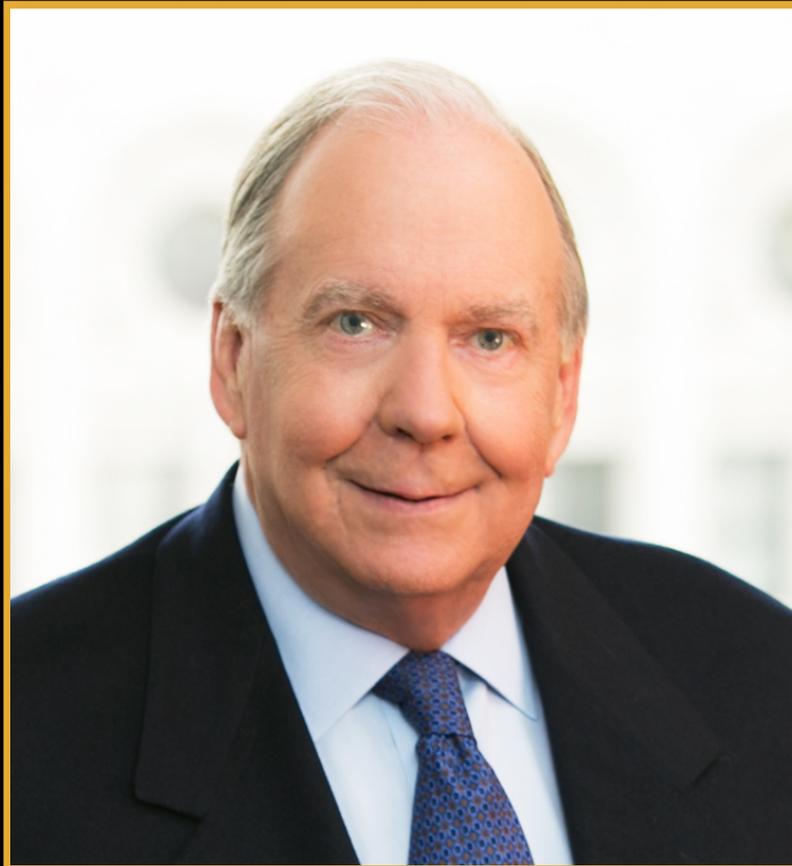




LIFETIME ACHIEVEMENT
AWARD



Thomas A. Demetrio

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The power of preparation. A record of winning verdicts. And plenty of legal milestones: Thomas Demetrio has earned his status as a legal legend.

By Dan Rafter — Special to Law Bulletin Media

“Demetrio made it his goal to be as fierce of an advocate for his clients as Corboy was for his.

Stepping into the courtroom only after he's thoroughly prepared for a case. Crafting meticulous final and opening arguments. And arguing not only to win over the jury in front of him, but also the appellate court that might one day hear an appeal of the case.

Those are some of the strategies upon which Thomas Demetrio has relied to build his legendary legal career.

Demetrio, partner with Chicago's Corboy & Demetrio, ranks as one of the most successful trial lawyers not only in Chicago but the nation. He's earned that status based on the results he's delivered for his clients. Demetrio earned the first eight-figure compensatory verdict in Illinois and has since acquired more than \$1 billion in verdicts and settlements.

Even more impressive? All his verdicts have been paid, and Demetrio has never lost an appeal.

It's because of results like these that Demetrio is known as a legendary legal mind.

But like many successful lawyers, Demetrio wasn't entirely sure after he earned his undergraduate degree if a career in law was in his future. After graduating from the University of Notre Dame in 1969, Demetrio joined the U.S. Army Reserve and began his basic training in California. Eventually, the Reserve stationed Demetrio with a unit at the former military base at O'Hare International Airport.

“I was free to go to work if I wanted, but I decided that I wasn't ready for that,” Demetrio said. “I went to law school to avoid going to work for three more years.”

Demetrio enrolled at IIT-Chicago Kent College of Law. While there, he took a course that required him to spend at least two hours a week observing a trial judge. Spending just 120 minutes in the courtroom a week, though? That didn't satisfy Demetrio. Instead, he sometimes spent as many as 30 hours a week observing judges and lawyers as they cross-examined witnesses, called for objections, issued rulings and delivered passionate closing arguments.

“I became infatuated with trial work,” Demetrio said.

And one of the lawyers who especially impressed Demetrio? Philip Corboy, the founding partner of Chicago law firm Corboy & Demetrio. Demetrio said that Corboy's courtroom presence, deep understanding of the law and willingness to work tirelessly for his clients set him apart from other attorneys. Demetrio made it his goal to be as fierce of an advocate for his clients as Corboy was for his.





Demetrio, then, was thrilled that Corboy, after Demetrio passed the bar exam in 1973, hired him. What was even more exciting? Corboy became a mentor to Demetrio.

"He had a fondness for me," Demetrio said. "He let me sit in on pre-trials. That was a big deal. A plaintiff would come in and tell a tale of woe. After the plaintiff would leave, Phil would ask me what I thought. I'd tell him and he'd share his theories with me. It was like a seminar in negotiations. I learned so much from him."

What was it about trial law that grabbed Demetrio's attention back then? He pointed to the wide array of skills attorneys needed to be successful. The way Demetrio saw it, working as a trial lawyer would come with very few boring days.

That prediction has come true.

"I was interested in learning more about the power of persuasion," Demetrio said. "That has always been such an important part of being a trial lawyer. The art of cross-examination is fascinating, too. The work that goes into crafting a compelling final argument is so enjoyable. And appealing to 12 strangers during a trial was something that I have always found to be a fascinating challenge."

What traits did Demetrio rely on to craft such a successful career? He points to several.

Tops among them is his dedication to preparation. Demetrio works hard to make sure he is prepared for trial. And those long hours of preparation inevitably pay off.

Demetrio points to James A. Dooley, a Chicago attorney who was once known as the dean of plaintiff lawyers. Corboy recommended that Demetrio watch



Philip Corboy and Tom Demetrio



Tom Demetrio and Judge Abe Marovitz

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Many years ago Tom set the standards for preparation, courtroom practice and professionalism. I've observed Tom Demetrio's unique courtroom skills for more than 40 years. Tom was the first lawyer in Chicago to use horizontal plane, cross sectional brain MRI technology to demonstrate devastating brain injuries.

In addition to my observations from the bench, I've done cases with lawyers from all over the country. On a national level, no lawyer is more deserving of a Lifetime Achievement Award.

Tom is nationally recognized as establishing the standard for the ultimate level of practice in the highest stakes cases. A few years ago, I was doing mediations of air crash cases in Miami, Florida. Invariably, the top tier Miami lawyers referenced the strategies and results Tom Demetrio had attained in presenting and supporting their respective positions.”

Hon. Donald P.
O'Connell
(Ret.)



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I have shared with Tom many of the important relationships which the practice of law offers—being opposing counsel, co-counsel in the circuit court, and working together on intricate appeals. From those vantages, I have seen firsthand the tremendous intensity he devotes to his cases. His unflagging attention to detail defies description. Yet at the same time, he possesses an unparalleled ability to seize the essence of a case from those details, and to then cast the key controversies, and their best resolution, in starkly simple terms.

It is emblematic of Tom's scholarship and concern for the law itself that he has described the many years he devoted to service on the Supreme Court's Committee on Pattern Instructions for Civil cases as being among the most important of his non-client legal endeavors, and that it was as fine a post-graduate legal education as could be found.

His great generosity, of his time, expertise, and resources, is practiced quietly, with widespread benefit. Tom's clients, his firm, and truly the law have immensely benefited from his sustained work at an extremely high level."

Michael T. Reagan,
Law Offices of
Michael T. Reagan



Dooley try a case. Demetrio remembers that he wasn't overly impressed with Dooley's courtroom presence.

As Demetrio remembers, Dooley had a habit of twirling his glasses while he spoke. He didn't stand when questioning witnesses, remaining in his seat instead. He lacked the booming, authoritative voice that Demetrio expected.

When Demetrio later asked Corboy why Dooley was considered such a force, Corboy cited the attorney's prep skills.

"No one ever enters a courtroom more prepared than Jim Dooley, Phil told me," Demetrio said. "The key to being successful is preparation. That has not changed. That is still the number-one factor."

But there are other skills that have been critical to Demetrio's long success. He cited his ability to control witnesses on cross-examination as another example.

"Jurors are rooting for you when you are a plaintiff's attorney," Demetrio said. "They want to see you win the battle of words, especially when you are cross-examining witnesses. They want to like who you are. Likability is important."



Tom Demetrio with Gerry Spence

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I have known Tom Demetrio from early on in his legal career starting when he was a young associate of Phillip A. Corboy. Since that time, Tom has achieved the pinnacle of success as a trial lawyer, bar association leader, family man and mentor.

Jurors like Tom because he is personable, credible, and charismatic. Judges and defense lawyers respect him as well because he is well prepared and a man of his word. If Tom tells you something, you take it to the bank. I am honored to call him a friend.

Tom has been devoted to his family and dedicated to his clients and our community. He has been philanthropic throughout his career. He has donat-

ed large sums of money to his alma maters, the University of Notre Dame and the Chicago Kent College of Law. In addition, he helped raise large sums of money for Chicago Kent College of Law to honor one of his mentors, Judge Abraham Lincoln Marovitz, for whom its courtroom was named. When Tom was President of the Chicago Bar Association, he founded the Lend A Hand program which raises money and helps mentor young people in Chicago area grammar and high schools.

He has obtained numerous seven and eight figure verdicts and settlements benefiting the clients of Corboy and Demetrio. In addition, he is a Past President of the Illinois Trial Lawyers and Chicago Bar Association. He has been

a fellow of the invitation-only American College of Trial Lawyers and the International Academy for many years. He has also served on the Illinois Supreme Court Pattern Jury Instruction Committee. Many of his proteges have gone on to serve as president of many bar associations and other related legal organizations.

I wish to congratulate Tom on this well-deserved Lifetime Achievement Award. He has had a wonderful career."

Joseph A.
Power Jr.,
Power Rogers
LLP





Senator Dick Durbin, Tom Demetrio and President Bill Clinton

Demetrio also pointed to the strength of his final arguments. Then there's the ability to select the right jurors for a case, which Demetrio says is the most important part of a trial.

"De-selecting and getting rid of jurors whom you know are going to hurt you is the biggest factor in whether you win or lose a case," he said. "If you succeed in doing that, you are halfway to a winning verdict. I've always had the philosophy that after opening statements are done, the case should be over. If you were successful in de-selecting the right jurors and you craft a strong opening statement, you've put yourself in a strong position to win. And if you are also the most prepared guy in the courtroom, that's how you succeed."

Demetrio has certainly enjoyed success throughout his career, notching several headline-grabbing verdicts and settlements. But sometimes the cases that have the most impact aren't the ones that make headlines.

Demetrio points to one past client who was installing a fence in his backyard after having earlier called Commonwealth Edison to send workers out to mark where he should not be digging. The client began digging, following the utility's instructions, but still suffered a shock strong enough to send him to the emergency room. The client was OK, but as Demetrio puts it, "He was madder than a hornet's nest."

Demetrio initially figured that the case wouldn't be worth taking on. After all, the plaintiff was not seriously hurt. But after meeting with the client, Demetrio changed his mind.

"He convinced me to think otherwise. He told me that we had to make a statement, that this is for the next person who might not be lucky and might die," Demetrio said.

Demetrio took the case. Then, about two weeks later, the same client asked if Demetrio could help a friend of his, a man named Dave Rickerson.

In 1981, Rickerson's wife was driving her two sons — one 10, the other 8 — when a semi-tractor trailer truck weighing 28,000 pounds crossed the center line of the four-lane highway and collided with the car head-on.

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I have known Tom for over 60 years, since the 1963 North Suburban High School Golf Championship.

Tom played for Evanston High School and I played for Niles West.

Tom and I had a lot in common. He is half Greek, as am I. We both were married in the Greek Orthodox Church. Tom's lovely wife, Deana, is Greek and my wife Debbie, cooks great Greek food.

Our lives intersected again in 1973. Tom was working for Phil Corboy and I was an associate at Kirkland & Ellis. Tom was representing the family of a man who was a laboratory technician, killed in a laboratory explosion of rocket fuel powder. I was representing a company that owned the rocket fuel powder and was using the lab to manufacture the fuel. The main issue in the case was what caused the fuel powder to ignite. The powder would not ignite even if you dropped a lit match into it.

Tom and I traveled to San Francisco and took depositions in the office of Melvin Belli, who defended Jack Ruby, who killed Lee Harvey Oswald, the alleged assassin of president John F. Kennedy. Right before trial Tom disclosed an expert witness whose opinion was that a static electric discharge caused the rocket fuel powder to ignite, causing the explosion. He demonstrated how this could happen by walking in front of the jury on the carpeted courtroom floor and touching the metal gate that opens and closes to let jurors enter and leave the courtroom. He received a static spark to his hand. I then watched each of the jurors enter and leave the courtroom by avoiding touching the metal gate with their bare hand. They would use either a gloved hand or would lean up against the gate with their body. This was like magic, using the courtroom to painfully remind the jurors what caused the explosion. I then realized Tom would win the case. This demonstrates Tom's brilliance as a trial lawyer, using the courtroom itself to reinforce his theory of causation."

*John W. Bell,
Johnson &
Bell Ltd.*



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The list of distinguished former Phil Corboy lawyers that would have loved to have been his partner reads like a who's who of famous trial attorneys: Al Hofeld, Richard Phelan and Jack Hayes just to name a few. It was well known that Corboy would never take a partner because to do so would be to admit that he had an equal. And, he never did. Until Tom. That puts Tom Demetrio in a class of ONE. His skills and knowledge of the law remain unparalleled as is evidenced by his incredible trial record. In addition, he did not just try winners – he tried tough cases and virtually always prevailed.

I was able to see Tom progress through his career and then watched him control and persuade from the bench. It was much more relaxing to make rulings as a judge than argue against him as a litigant. As talented a lawyer as he became, his wagering on the golf course remained suspect. He never met a challenge he did not accept and golf was no exception. It is not surprising that he brings the same approach to life that he always brought to the courtroom. Always a gentleman and friend to all, he continues to guide one of the most powerful law firms to new heights. Though Corboy would never admit it, history has revealed that he met his equal in his partner – Tom Demetrio.”

Hon. William D. Maddux (Ret.)



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Everyone you meet in this business some day might have an important matter that depending on how you treated them will dictate if that important matter comes to you.

The crash killed Carol Rickerson and the Rickersons' 8-year-old son, Scott. It left their 10-year-old son Steven permanently disabled.

Demetrio agreed to take on this case and rejected an \$8 million settlement offer before the trial began. The results affirmed that Demetrio was right to refuse the offer: He obtained a record-setting \$12 million jury verdict for Rickerson, the first such eight-figure verdict in the state of Illinois.

“I would not have gotten the call to take on this case if I hadn't taken on the Commonwealth Edison matter first,” Demetrio said. “That was a lesson learned. Everyone you meet in this business some day might have an important matter that depending on how you treated them will dictate if that important matter comes to you.”

This wasn't the only time that Demetrio turned down a big settlement offer. There was one case in which he was offered a \$16 million settlement. Demetrio rejected this offer, too. The eventual verdict in that case came at just under \$30 million in favor of Demetrio's client.

“I have never worried about losing,” Demetrio said. “I just make decisions. If you worry about the decisions that you make professionally, it will detract you from the job at hand. You make a decision based on the facts known to you. You either accept an offer or you don't.”

Another rare accomplishment? Demetrio has never lost an appeal. He says this is because he doesn't just try a case for the jury in front of him. He also

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Someone who doesn't know Thomas Demetrio might think that his most memorable cases would be the ones where he's secured record-setting verdicts, including the first 8-figure verdict in Illinois in a personal injury case. Or the \$42.4 medical malpractice verdict he obtained in 2022 for the wife and children of a quadriplegic man who died as the result of medical negligence. Thomas has been ranked the #1 lawyer in Illinois by Super Lawyers for six of the past seven years. But he won't mention that either.

These accolades are not what makes Tom an extraordinary lawyer and person. Tom is professionally devoted to

obtaining justice for his clients and he's equally devoted to giving back to underserved communities and to those without access to justice.

Tom is the inspiration and founder of Lawyers Lend-A-Hand, which was started in 1995. It has provided \$2 million in grants to tutoring/mentoring groups over the years and, since 2016, provides direct mentoring/tutoring to students by Chicago legal professionals. Tom's passion for giving back has resulted in thousands of underserved and at-risk children in Chicago getting the resources they deserve.

Another example of Tom's drive to help people in need is the matter of Kaney

O'Neill, who was serving in the U.S. military and was rendered a quadriplegic after a gust of wind knocked her from a balcony. O'Neill's ex-boyfriend was seeking full custody of their infant, alleging O'Neill was unfit because she was quadriplegic. Tom took her case pro bono, schooled himself in domestic relations law, and after a several week hearing, secured full custody for O'Neill. Kaney and her family visit Tom each year, bringing Christmas cookies for him and the entire office.”

Hon. James N. O'Hara (Ret.)



considers what the appellate court might think if an appeal is filed after the initial verdict.

As Demetrio says, he never wants to make a mistake while trying a case that will result in a retrial.

"You want to protect the record," he said. "That is where preparation comes in again. You want to be so prepared that you won't make a mistake that could come back to hurt you later."

Even while building such a successful career, Demetrio hasn't been shy about helping his community. Demetrio is especially interested in the positive value of mentors. As he says, he would never have enjoyed such a successful career if it weren't for the help of the skilled lawyers and judges who took the time to teach him about the intricacies of building a legal career.

That's why Demetrio believes that everyone needs to find the right mentors. To help with this, Demetrio helped create the Thomas A. Demetrio Award of Excellence, which supports the efforts of top tutoring and mentoring programs in Chicago communities.



Tom Demetrio, Toinette Gunn, PEAK Executive Director (center), and Genita Robinson, Lend-A-Hand Executive Director (right)

Demetrio also played a key role in inspiring and guiding the Chicago Bar Association and Chicago Bar Foundation when they created the Lawyers Lend-A-Hand to Youth program, a program that fosters mentorship relationships. In addition to the annual Demetrio Award, the Lend-A-Hand to Youth Program has granted more than \$1.6 million to mentoring programs for underprivileged youths in the Chicago area.

"In my case, mentoring was critical," Demetrio said. "I've told countless new lawyers that their first job is their most important job. That is where you learn habits. Osmosis works. Who you will be following around and observing is critical. It was for me. Phil Corboy himself was certainly a great role model."

As for the future? Demetrio says that he looks forward to continuing to fight for justice for his clients, something he plans on doing until the job is no longer fun. Fortunately, Demetrio says, he's still passionate about the law and enjoys the work necessary to win cases.

"This is still a career that I love," Demetrio said. "I don't see that changing anytime soon."

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I am honored that you asked me to write a short testimonial marking the long and amazing career of Tom. He has received so many of these in his time as a lawyer, mentor, philanthropist and law firm builder that I hope my attempt is not redundant.

Like most young trial lawyers in formation I first encountered Tom watching him represent clients in jury trials in the Daley Center. At a very young age, he was able to go toe-to-toe in the courtroom with the more "mature" lawyers of the 1970's and 1980's because he was always well prepared. Nothing they did to throw him off his game seemed to affect the way he went about trying his case. He did not lose sight of what was important – ensuring that his client received the best possible representation.

We got to know one another when he began to try cases in front of me in the early 2000's. He was professional in his dealings with his opposing counsel, even when opposing counsel tried to draw him into fights in front of the jury. He did not take the bait because he knew that would not be in his, and his client's, best interest. Due to the many cases he had presented to a jury, he came to understand that he was better when he didn't respond unprofessionally. He displayed a level of calmness, even when things may not have been going as planned, that almost all of his colleagues at the bar never learned to display.

Tom is one of the top trial lawyers in the country but that is not all that he has done for the profession. He has been a bar leader as CBA President, law firm builder, mentor to a wide variety of lawyers and the founder/ funder of a group of attorneys in the Lawyers Lend a Hand program that has worked for years in Engelwood tutoring grammar school students. These are just some of the marvelous things Tom has done. It is time to give this award to one of the legal giants of the past three generations – Tom Demetrio."

Hon. Thomas L. Hogan (Ret.)

