
A Modern-Day David Versus Goliath: Frank Darras

By Mary Waldron

LawCrossing

"When you come from nothing, fear is not an option, because what can they take from you?"

That powerful sentence has become the mantra of one of America's top plaintiff's attorneys, voice for the disabled and senior-citizen community Frank Darras.

Coming from a simple and modest background, the down-to-earth Darras has built his tremendous law career on the principle of standing up to the big guys for those who cannot do it themselves. Battling it out with insurance companies and providers who take advantage of their weaker clients, Darras has set out to spread the word that "he's not little anymore, and he's got a big responsibility."

Darras grew up in a working-class family in Illinois and developed a strong work ethic early on in life. His mother graduated from high school and his father got his GED in the Marines, so the family was more concerned with the basic necessities of life than with stocks and bonds.

After his parents divorced when he was young, Darras learned a valuable life lesson. "My dad told me when I was young, 'Son, you can have anything in this life that you pay for,' and he meant it," he said. "It was a wonderful but very hard lesson that I could depend on myself to get as far as I wanted."

Earning everything that came his way and aiming toward a better place, Darras was a hard worker throughout his life, which later influenced his passion for helping others to overcome and jump the walls of corporate society's boundaries. "I had done every job, working from fifth grade on. I had a real compassion and empathy, and I sure wasn't haughty because I had my lunch pail and my shovel in my hand; blue-collar is the way that I grew up," he said.

As a star football player with a scholarship to a top university, Darras had the chance to become a pro football player until his plans changed dramatically the summer before his first year of college. Darras' fingers slipped into a forklift chain while he was loading trucks, leaving him unable to play football.

With little hope of attaining an academic scholarship, Darras was left to pay for college by himself. He went on to attend a junior college, as well as a university, but never completed his degree. As a paramedic, however, Darras found a place in his heart for the medical field and helping people in need. Combining his prior sales experience at Ford Motor Company with his devotion to looking out for others, Darras later found a great opportunity as a medical salesman and jumped at it.

When she was going into her second year at Western State University, Darras' sister, Helen, suggested to him that he might want to apply for law school. It had been seven years since Darras had been to school, but he "saw law school as an opportunity to take on the giants of the industry."

With a busy travel schedule because of his medical-sales job, Darras was drawn to the law school at Western State

because of its unique part-time program that would accommodate his lifestyle. At that time, Western State University was the only law school that could make it possible for Darras to succeed, so it was vital that he be accepted.

As he had only average grades and scores and an uncompleted undergraduate degree, it seemed unlikely that Darras would be accepted into law school. Although he was not the quintessential cutout of a law student, Darras' passion to rise above and make a difference as a lawyer shone through in his interview at the law school. That day, in the office of the counselor who later accepted him, Darras proclaimed, "If you open this door for me, one day, I will make a difference in the law, and you will be proud to call me a Western State University graduate."

Darras' years in law school were tough and unlike those of many other law students. Battling the constant struggle to balance his demanding job, law school, and his marriage, Darras was lucky to have an understanding and supportive wife as well as encouraging mentors.

"As I look back and reflect on who really influenced me and believed in me, it was my wife. With her patience and tireless commitment to me and the horrific schedule that I had in order to put food on the table and get through law school, she was a saint," he said. Without his wife's constant compassion, combined with his law school's great opportunities, Darras feels that he never would have been able to make it in law.

When he graduated from law school, Darras went to work at the Los Angeles District Attorney's Office. Early on in this part of his career, Darras started working on disability-related cases and discovered that he was "at home" in that practice area.

After completing one of his first cases, which was a disability case, he said to his partners, "Guys, when I'm through, every farmhouse, cul-de-sac, and thoroughfare is going to know that my name means real help when it comes to disability. No matter who they are, people will know that I am different. That is my vision."

Darras later made the transition to Shernoff & Levine as a paralegal in 1988. He had sought to work for a firm that took on the industry for a while, and Shernoff & Levine certainly fit the bill. Darras had developed a love for taking on challenges like "the big versus little, weak versus strong" and defending the "outmanned, outnumbered, and outgunned."

Darras had been trying to get his foot in the door at the landmark insurance bad-faith law firm, so when he heard that one of its paralegals was going on maternity leave, he offered to work for free for 90 days so that he could have a chance. His request was granted. Two years later, after "growing some Chihuahuas into Great Danes" at the firm, Darras made partner, and the firm's name changed to Shernoff, Bidart & Darras.

Twenty years and \$600 million later, Darras is still fighting for the little guys, no matter what it takes. Never forgetting his humble roots, Darras has focused a lot of his professional philosophy on bringing bad-faith disability, long-term care, and life insurance cases to justice for those who cannot afford to do so.

"The blessing of looking at 1,000 new cases per month with a national practice is that most lawyers are not going to get involved with [a \$20,000 or lower] case because they have to be filed in federal courts, and combined with the associated costs, who is going to spend \$100,000 to get \$20,000? I do, I have, and I will," Darras said. "That's a real strong message to the industry. When you've got thousands of those cases, it's easy for them to pick on people who can't finance a case and don't have the wherewithal, the resources, or the reach."

Because of this, Darras has made a commitment to target abusive companies in a manner that affects their legal budgets and, ideally, their future procedures and policies.

Besides representing smaller clients, Darras also handles cases for many of today's leading entertainers, athletes, and other high-profile professionals. He has received numerous awards for his excellence and success in law, including recognition as one of the country's top 500 attorneys, litigators, and plaintiff's lawyers. Darras is also a member of the "Ten Million Dollar Rainmaker" circle, an organization that recognizes lawyers who generate more than \$10 million per year in legal fees.

Having kept his word to the Western State University counselor who let him into law school more than 20 years ago, Darras had attained a level of legal stature that has allowed him to make a bold impression on the community and society. His generous and noble professional standards set him apart from the bulk of lawyers out there.

"Somebody's got to love you when you're at your worst, and somebody's got to help you when everybody else says no. If I'm known for anything in the industry, I'm known for tackling the most difficult cases in the toughest venues and spending more money on the smallest claims to show the industry that they're not going to snuff out the little folks," Darras said.

Q.
What do you do for fun?

A.
I have two great kids. I play golf with my 16-year-old daughter, and baseball is my 13-year-old son's passion, so we travel a lot with his team. Between my two kids and attending to my wife of 24 years, those three are my hobbies.

Q.
What CD is in your CD player right now?

A.
One of my friend's CDs which is called Tony's Greatest Hits by Tony Ciabattoni.

Q.
What's the last magazine you read?

A.
AARP.

Q.
What is your favorite TV show?

A.
I like Prison Break.

Q.
Who is your role model?

A.
I really like David from the Bible story of David and Goliath.