

Hugh Keefe: At Home in the Courtroom

by Joe Zibell

To be a successful trial lawyer you need to have the spirit of a battler. In an environment rife with contentiousness and confrontation, a weak spine will not suffice. Just as fundamental as having a quick mind, is the willingness to get in the trenches and toil until the job is done.

For nearly four decades, Hugh Keefe has brought that spirit and dedication to the courtrooms of New Haven. The son of Irish immigrants from a working class background, Keefe built a distinguished and famed career on the foundation of hard work and dedication, and his absolute joy at working in the courtroom.

In a recent interview with *New Haven Business Times*, Keefe offered a glimpse of what has made him such a successful trial lawyer, and what it has been like to be a fixture on the New Haven scene for such a long period of time.

Keefe's career began in 1967, when, fresh out of UConn Law, he was hired by the firm where he still remains. At the time it was called Lynch and Traub; today the New Haven-based firm is Lynch, Traub, Keefe and Errante.

"It wasn't criminal law specifically that I was interested in, it was trial law," recalls Keefe about his first days as a lawyer. "I wanted to do anything where I could get into court."

As a result, from the onset, Keefe volunteered for any case at his firm that would put him in the courtroom, whether it was a personal injury case, accident case, commercial case, divorce or custody cases, and of course criminal cases. He wanted as much experience and exposure as he could get.

"I loved the court. I loved being there immediately, as soon as I started practicing," says Keefe. "It was a relatively small firm at the time, and there were clearly things you could do back at the office: wills, corporations, estates, real



Hugh Keefe, managing partner, Lynch, Traub, Keefe & Errante, P.C.

estate closings and things like that. But I never had any interest in, nor was I particularly good at, any of that stuff. I felt at home in the court room almost immediately, and have never stopped feeling that.

"There are some people who acclimate to do different things. There are some people at home in litigation. Some people don't like contentiousness or confrontation. Others don't like the battles in the courtroom that go on — the tension, the pressure that they feel.

Other people don't like the tediousness of an office practice, which I found very boring."

Establishing a Reputation

Today, Keefe is recognized as one of the best trial lawyers in the state, and his accolades over the course of the past three decades are numerous. There isn't one case that changed the direction of his career, or one seminal moment when he knew he had 'made it.' Instead, Keefe has a workman-like approach for how to build a successful career.

"A lawyer's reputation is made in the first five years you're out of law school," says Keefe. "If you're in the trial business, you're up or down at the end of five years; people have made their minds up about you. You're either a good lawyer, committed and professional, or you're not.

"As far as establishing yourself, it's a gradual thing. I think there is no substitute for complete commitment to whatever you're doing.

"A friend of mine called me recently, and he said his son had tried a murder case; he's a young lawyer and it was his first such case. During jury deliberations, when they were

deciding whether to convict the defendant of murder or not, the son had taken his family to go skiing in Vermont and had left his father, my friend, to take the verdict and wait for the jury to deliver their decision, which could take a day, two days . . . it could be a week.

"I was stunned by that story because it demonstrated to me that this fellow had no commitment to the law whatsoever. His heart and soul weren't in it. When I was his age, a young lawyer out of law school, not in a million years could I

have left the courtroom if the jury was deliberating the fate of my client. It would not even have occurred to me; I wouldn't want to go anywhere else, especially for a murder case.

"There is no more serious case to try; I don't care what the civil ramifications are in a major malpractice case or class action case. If you have someone's liberty or life at stake in a case which you are personally responsible for, and the only thing standing between him and the hangman is you, it's inconceivable to me that a lawyer would not have stayed there and do whatever he could for that client during jury deliberations.

"A reputation is gained by having a commitment to do what's best for your client, whether it's an individual or a corporation."

For Keefe, it is easy to see which lawyers have their heart in their craft, which ones are passionate about law. The courtroom is a very transparent place; as Keefe says, "you can't hide."

"People can tell when a lawyer has his or her heart in it," says Keefe. "We operate in a fishbowl. You're in front of a jury, a judge, spectators, witnesses and clients, and whatever you're doing, it's public and it's on display. There are almost no circumstances now when we have closed court rooms.

"It's very obvious to me and everyone else if a lawyer has his heart in it. And if they don't, in my view, they have no business taking the case, and if they don't have their heart in any case, they have no business being a courtroom lawyer."

Putting Your Heart & Soul Into the Job

The individuals and corporations that Keefe represents are being charged with reprehensible actions and often heinous crimes. Taking on the responsibilities of such cases, Keefe stresses, is not done lightly.

"In private practice one of the great luxuries we have is you don't have to take a case if you don't want to," says

Keefe. "For example, our medical malpractice philosophy is to screen every case very carefully. We don't sue a doctor lightly. We have two full-time nurses on our staff here who do nothing but screen incoming cases to see if they're worthy to sue.

"You don't have to take every case, and we don't by any means. However, once you make that commitment — 'I'm going to be your lawyer' — to me that's a sacred commitment.

That means you're going to do the very best in your capacity for that person. If you're heart is in it, as it should be, you're not going to sleep well until you've done the very best possible job for that client."

Although the number of cases Keefe has turned down are few, it has been done definitively, due to how he has felt professionally and morally.

"People ask me, 'Are there any cases in criminal law that you wouldn't take?' or 'Have you turned down cases?' There are very few cases in criminal law that I don't take," says Keefe. "The principal kind of case that I don't are sexual assault/rape cases where it's called an ambush rape between strangers. To me, that is so fundamentally offensive. However, I don't turn the case down because I'm morally offended by it, which I am, but because I couldn't be an effective, committed advocate in that case."

Keefe referenced the recent case in Cheshire from this past summer that shocked the community and made national headlines. "I've been in this business for almost 40 years. I can't recall a case that is more reprehensible than that case. I cannot recall a single criminal case that has taken place in this state, or for that matter any state, that has more details to it that are so patently offensive. People have asked me if I would take that case, and I've said, 'No, I wouldn't take that case.' These people are entitled to the presumption of innocence, and they can

have it, but I couldn't do a good job with that case. I would subconsciously be rooting against myself. A lawyer has no business being involved with a case in which they can't give their heart and soul to the defense."

Embracing New Haven

Although Keefe was born and raised in Boston, he had called this region home for quite some time. A graduate of West Haven High School, he

did his undergraduate work at then-Quinnipiac College before studying law at the University of Connecticut. Remaining at one firm all of these years, has given Keefe a unique perspective of the changes that the city has undergone in that time.

"My wife and I are thrilled with this city. This city has undergone a renaissance in the last 10-15 years that would've been hard to predict 20 years ago," said Keefe. "In comparing it to where I grew up, Boston is alive and vibrant. I always said that New Haven is Boston on a smaller scale. Although it went through some tough times, it is now back.

"If you're going to live in Connecticut, there is no other place to live; there is no other place to practice law. There is no city in the state that comes close. New Haven is a goldmine."

Keefe's wife is widely renowned attorney Tara Knight, and as an emphasis to the point about feeling at home in New Haven, the couple just purchased a completely renovated 1895 house on Orange Street in order to, as Keefe put it, "be in the center of things."

Keefe's mother used to kid him that his last "honest job" was when he loaded trucks for UPS when he was law school. When it came to his success, she would say, "Don't let it go to your head, Hughey."

By continuing to remain true to his original passion and his high standards of workmanship, it's safe to say that it hasn't. And as an essential piece in the chain of justice, it's refreshing to see as renowned an attorney as Keefe is keeping that perspective intact. ◇

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