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Plaintiffs Bar Perspective: Standly Hamilton's Chris Hamilton

Law360, New York (May 15, 2017, 11:21 AM EDT) -- Chris Hamilton is a Dallas-based trial lawyer at Standly Hamilton whose skill and passion have combined to produce winning results for his clients again and again. In the last several years alone, he's won a record-setting \$27 million premises liability verdict against McDonald's, a \$19.7 million medical malpractice verdict against a local hospital and an \$11.5 million settlement in a whistleblower case involving kickbacks paid to doctors.

Most recently, Hamilton has spearheaded efforts in the Dallas-Fort Worth area to provide pro bono counsel to refugees and immigrants caught up in the aftermath of President Trump's executive order on immigration. In addition, he helped found and fund, and now serves as president, of Lawyers for America, a response team of pro bono attorneys.



Chris Hamilton

Q: What's the most rewarding aspect of working as a plaintiffs attorney?

A: The most rewarding aspect of my practice is to be able to work on cases that make a difference. The cases we handle not only make a difference for our clients, they often have the potential to make a difference for our country. Because we handle only contingent fee work, we have the great blessing of working only on those cases that we choose and believe in. We have a motto regarding all of our contingent fee cases, "We work only on cases that we would be willing to work on for free."

Q: Share an example of a case that was particularly challenging, and how you handled it.

A: I had a case that was brought to me by a law school friend where an autopsy showed that the two college student plaintiffs died in a car accident. The driver of the car, their friend, had a blood alcohol above the legal limit, and the two decedents had blood alcohol nearly twice the legal limit. The case was brought against McDonald's Corporation, where one of the decedent's had been involved in a fight earlier that night, but there was little to no documentary evidence regarding the fight, and the coroner indicated the fight played no role in causing the death.

Through our investigation, we discovered that the McDonald's had been operated as a "fight club" environment where large crowds would go after the bars closed to hang out, frequently resulting in large brawls. Tracking down witnesses, we discovered that the victim had been attacked without provocation and very severely beaten prior to the car accident. We retained a world-class forensic pathologist and a biomechanics expert who proved that the victim had suffered a fatal skull fracture during the fight. While the county coroner disagreed, the jury believed our experts. With this evidence, we were able to prove that the rescue doctrine should apply to the other deceased passenger since they were trying to get the fight victim to the hospital. The jury awarded \$27 million in a conservative Texas venue where the previous record verdict was less than \$2 million.

Q: What advice would you offer to young lawyers interested in practicing as a plaintiffs attorney?

A: Don't be afraid to go to trial. Don't settle every case. Don't wait until you are 10 years out to start trying cases. Start trying cases day one. It is like learning an instrument — it is much easier if you start before you know any better.

Q: What's one trend currently impacting your practice?

A: Continued attacks on the role of the jury system and the constitutional right to a jury trial — which I personally believe is probably our single most important democratic institution. Unfortunately, this is not a good trend. I truly believe that we're living through an era — brought about by "tort reform" and other such misguided ideas — where we're seeing an unprecedented assault on the Seventh Amendment guarantee of trial by jury. The role of the jury system and the constitutional right to a jury trial are, I believe, fundamental to American democracy and that concerns me, as it should all lawyers.

Q: Name a plaintiffs attorney outside your own firm who has impressed you and tell us why.

A: Lisa Blue, who has been my most influential mentor. She is really a pioneer in the modern method of jury selection — which is the most important phase of the trial. She is an expert at making the complicated simple. And she sets a terrific example to the bar in mentoring, philanthropy, pro bono work, and service to our community and our country.

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