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Cover Story

Pittsburgh's most successful attorneys talk about the cases that made their careers



[Patty Tascarella](#)

Senior Reporter- *Pittsburgh Business Times*

[Email](#) | [Twitter](#) | [Google+](#) | [LinkedIn](#)

The complexity of the profession notwithstanding, it really comes down to this: The lawyer makes the case.

And sometimes the case makes the lawyer. That's the power of attorney.

Ask just about anyone in the business community — scratch that, ask any lawyer downtown, since he's handled so many of their own divorces — about [Gary Gentile](#). They'll tell you. He's the guy who turned 84 Lumber into 42.

In a divorce case so large and notorious that it was covered even by the National Enquirer, **84 Lumber Co.'s** millionaire founder [Joe Hardy](#) split from [Dorothy Hardy](#), his wife of 50 years, and eventually married his 20-something girlfriend. Gentile represented [Dorothy Hardy](#).

The settlement, reached in 1997, wasn't disclosed, but the tag trails the lawyer like a pup. Gentile's been involved in bigger transactions since — he was among several attorneys handling the divorce between billionaire publisher [Richard Scaife](#) and his second wife, Margaret "Richie" Battle Scaife, and perhaps the only one who wouldn't comment in Vanity Fair's article on the bust-up, but none upstage the demise of the Hardy marriage.

But ask Gentile what he believes to be the case that put him on the map and it's a 180-degree turn. As a young assistant public defender in 1974, he represented a man already convicted of murder who was on trial for his role in the murder of a prison guard. Gentile was cross-examining a witness, another guard.

"I could feel and observe his discomfort and hear and sense the emotional discomfort of the victim's family who were sitting about 10 feet behind me, reliving these events through his testimony," Gentile recalled.

Then Gentile was abruptly — and literally — sucker-punched and knocked to the ground by his own client in a bid for a mistrial. The judge wasn't buying it.

"Lost the fight. Lost the trial," Gentile said.

But he's kept the memory.

"Without a doubt (a high-profile case) can start your career," said [Lori Carpenter](#), president of Carpenter Legal Search, which recruits lawyers for firms and corporations. "It's a great entry into working for other types of similar clients. It sets you apart as an expert."

How a case punctuates a career has a personal perspective.

[William Pietragallo II](#), founding partner of **Pietragallo Gordon Alfano Bosick & Raspanti** LLP, represented another larger law firm, now known as **K&L Gates** LLP, in an accounting and legal malpractice claim brought against it in the mid-1980s by what was then KPMG Peat Marwick.

"Although I have achieved over 100 civil jury verdicts, I can look back at that one success, more than any other, as being a transformational moment in my career," Pietragallo said.

[Charles Queenan](#), the K&L managing partner who retained Pietragallo, said how a lawyer handles a particular case can capture attention.

"There have been some, like [David Boies](#), who was with Cravath and came into prominence for the IBM case," Queenan said. "If there was a guy that a case started, it was Boies."

Boies, then with New York firm Cravath Swain & Moore LLP, defended IBM in a succession of antitrust cases brought by the Department of Justice, and went on to handle even more high-profile cases such as the United States v. Microsoft, **New York Yankees** owner [George Steinbrenner](#)'s suit against Major League Baseball and Vice President [Al Gore](#)'s challenge of the 2000 presidential election results in Bush v. Gore.

But it's rare that a single case, no matter how visible, results in a lawyer being hired, Queenan said. He's seen — and hired — his fair share, too. Queenan joined his firm in 1956 when it employed 12; today it has more than 2,000.

"It would have to be more than one case," Queenan said. "You look at the educational background and the practice areas the perceived candidate has been involved in, and you look pretty hard to ascertain if there's a cultural fit."

When firms hire experienced lawyers, they're looking for a book of business.

"It's certainly a factor that law firms, when looking at a lateral hire, would look at," said [Maura McAnney](#), an owner of legal recruitment firm **McAnney Esposito & Kraybill Associates Inc.** "But ultimately, it's the client relations moving forward that they focus on. If someone has been involved in a case that's negative or positive, it could result in conflicts that could make the transition difficult. If the case was a long time ago and no longer presents conflict issues, it can certainly help a law firm because they're looking to attract the best. But a great case doesn't necessarily transition to profitable business."

Changes in the economy, particularly a surge in an industry sector, can shake up the legal landscape, creating demand for areas of specialization. That's happened locally with the technology boom in the 1980s and more recently with energy. And the related cases can put a lawyer on the map.

"We've seen careers morph as legal needs change," Carpenter said. "Everything changes with the economy, and lawyers' clients change their direction and focus."

A case can reposition a career. Jones Day Partner Roy Powell has practiced law for more than 30 years and is co-chairman of its firmwide construction practice.

Four years ago, Powell was tapped by NCL Appalachian Partners LP to represent it in a dispute on a sale of acreage/mineral rights. He not only won the case, but also opened up opportunities for Jones Day.

"Just as the transformation discoveries in (Marcellus) shale have changed this region forever, it has transformed our practice, and this is the case that put me on the map in this shale revolution," Powell said.

Carpenter said the emergence of the Marcellus Shale is a good example of triggering new practice areas at several firms.

"There are numerous lawyers who have reinvented or made a name for themselves in the Marcellus Shale," she said. "They seize the opportunities, a lot of which come from existing clients that take on new business interests and, from there, additional work tends to flow."

Patty Tascarella covers accounting, banking, finance, legal, marketing and advertising and foundations. Contact her at ptascarella@bizjournals.com or 412-208-3832. .