

Searcy Denney Scarola Barnhart & Shipley, P.A.

A Passion for Justice (<http://www.sflegalguide.com/searcy.html>)



Partners Christian Searcy, F. Gregory Barnhart and Jack Scarola

For more than 35 years, the trial lawyers at Searcy Denney Scarola Barnhart & Shipley, P.A. have been assisting victims of accidents, negligence, and social injustice in Florida and across the nation. “We have a passion for justice,” says Christian D. Searcy, president and CEO of the West Palm Beach firm. “In pursuit of that goal, we have obtained substantial verdicts and settlements on behalf of clients in Florida and across the country.”

Today, the 25-attorney firm – whose five name partners are all board certified in civil litigation – handles a wide variety of cases, including product liability, medical malpractice and contested estate matters. Searcy Denney also has a three-attorney office in Tallahassee.

“It is difficult and time-consuming to bring product liability cases against consumer goods and medical device or pharmaceutical manufacturers, but we have the resources and determination to succeed,” says partner Greg Barnhart, whose trial record includes more than 65 verdicts of \$1 million or more.

Partner Jack Scarola leads the firm’s growing commercial litigation practice. “We are primarily known for our personal injury and medical malpractice cases, but those skills translate well into other matters,” he says. “Today, our firm does a substantial amount of commercial litigation, including legal malpractice, intellectual property and employment discrimination. We are also taking on plaintiffs’ mass tort work and have been successful in several significant cases.”

As a litigation-focused law firm, Searcy Denney can trace its roots back to 1900, when two Jacksonville trial lawyers founded Howell & Howell. In 1957, a young attorney named Robert

Montgomery joined the firm, which was then known as Howell & Kirby. Nine years later, the firm's partners decided to open several new offices in Florida, and Montgomery came to West Palm Beach. At that time, Howell Kirby Montgomery and D'Aiuto focused mostly on insurance defense litigation, growing to 55 attorneys in half a dozen cities by the late 1960s.

"Bob Montgomery started handling some plaintiff's cases, and found he enjoyed them," says Searcy, who had earned his law degree and began his career at the Miami firm Frates, Floyd, Pearson and Stewart in the early 1970s. "I wanted to be a plaintiff's lawyer, but wasn't sure about going to a new firm."

Then, Montgomery called Searcy's father, a longtime friend, and learned that Searcy and his wife Priscilla needed a new car. "She was pregnant with our first child and when she stopped at a traffic light, the car would pop out of gear," Searcy recalls. "She would have to open the hood and put it back into gear. Once Bob learned about that, he offered to throw in a new Cadillac – along with raising my salary – and that car clinched the deal."

That was in 1973, and Searcy quickly became known as an effective plaintiff's attorney. But the firm began facing a series of client conflicts because so much of its work came from the insurance defense side. By the mid 1970s, the West Palm Beach office became Montgomery, Lytle Reiter, Denney and Searcy. Lytle and Reiter stayed until 1986, when they left to form their own firm, followed in 1989 by Montgomery, who also formed his own firm.

Meanwhile, the West Palm Beach plaintiff's firm was attracting other top trial attorneys, including Lois Frankel, Barnhart and Scarola, who all started the same day in 1978. Frankel had been with the public defender's office, where she had compiled an excellent trial record. She later left the firm, to become a state representative and mayor of the City of West Palm Beach.

"Jack Scarola was a top prosecutor with the state attorney's office," Searcy says. "One of his high-profile cases was the first gavel-to-gavel televised trial involving a contract murder. Jack got a conviction, based on circumstantial evidence, and soon afterwards joined our firm."

Barnhart adds, "In the 1970s, it seemed like every courtroom had a trial going on and one of our lawyers was handling the case. We were encouraged to go to trial and expected to win our cases."

Barnhart vividly remembers a four-week medical malpractice trial in 1984 where he and Searcy represented a 1-year-old brain-injured girl. "Her pediatrician and the local hospital were highly respected in the community, and nobody was on our side," he says. After Barnhart and Searcy refused a settlement for \$4 million, the jury came back with a verdict for \$10.5 million, the biggest in state history at the time. "It took a lot of courage to get to that point," he says, "but we

prevailed.”

Two decades later, Scarola achieved another record verdict in a stock fraud claim involving Morgan Stanley and corporate raider “Chainsaw” Al Dunlap. The month-long 2003 trial resulted in a \$1.2 billion verdict on behalf of Scarola’s client – the largest award to an individual plaintiff in history. However, an appellate court later reversed the trial judge’s decision for technical legal reasons.

In 2007, Searcy had an unprecedented year in court. He led Searcy Denney’s trial teams in a brain injury trial in Fort Myers that resulted in a \$30.8 million verdict; an automobile accident in West Palm Beach with a \$21.7 million verdict; a wrongful birth case in Tampa with a \$23.5 million verdict; and a misfiled prescription case against Walgreen’s that resulted in a \$25.8 million verdict. He ended the year with a pro bono case, representing his mentor, attorney Larry Stewart, in a class action case. “There’s not a lawyer in the history of jurisprudence who’s had a year like Chris did in 2007,” Scarola says.

Nationally known for his trial work, Searcy is past president of the invitation-only International Academy of Trial Lawyers and was inducted into the American College of Trial Lawyers in 2011. Meanwhile, the Florida Justice Association in 2005 honored Searcy with its Perry Nichols Award, recognition of a lifetime of outstanding service to the cause of justice. The next year, Searcy was one of only two lawyers in the country to receive the “War Horse Award” from the Southern Trial Lawyers Association, honoring his trial skills and contributions to the cause of justice.

Other members of the firm are also active leaders in legal and civic organizations. For example, Barnhart is past president of the Federal Bar Association and the Academy of Florida Trial Lawyers. Other partners and associates are active volunteers in numerous charitable organizations.

“We all feel the need to give back and help the area where we live,” says Searcy. “One of the causes that’s dear to us is the plight of brain-injured children, like my oldest son who is now 37 and has verbal skills of a 2-year-old. Through the years, we have supported many worthy causes and find that work to be very fulfilling. That’s always been an important part of the culture of our firm.”