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Christian “Chris” D. Searcy

Searcy Denney Scarola Barnhart & Shipley, P.A.

Life is full of a series of individual moments that have the capacity to define you and set the course for your future. Sometimes, singular events are either so euphoric or tragic that they help form an intrinsic part of your being. Citing a quote from Charles Dickens’ literary masterpiece, “A Tale of Two Cities,” as a description of those moments in his own life, Chris Searcy, president and CEO of Searcy Denney Scarola Barnhart & Shipley, P.A., said, “It was the best of times, it was the worst of times....”

“I’m frequently asked why I became an attorney, particularly one who specializes in representing clients who have suffered catastrophic injuries and tragedy,” said Searcy. “The simple answer is: I understand because I have been there and I want to help. Very little good can come out of a tragedy, but the insight I have to help others when they are suffering is invaluable.”

It was the worst of times...On June 1, 1960, Chris’ mom was driving a 12-year-old Chris and Henry, Searcy’s 6-year-old brother, home. As they approached an unmarked intersection that was under construction, a car sped through it and broadsided their vehicle. Henry’s head was crushed in the accident and he was killed instantly. In the wake of this tragedy, Chris was sent to stay at a relative’s house while his parents tried to put back together the pieces of their lives. It was the best of times...The day after his move, he met Priscilla, his soul mate, future wife and mother of his four children: Henry, Will, Christian and Angela. Though he is grateful to be where he is today, Chris still feels the crushing sadness of the accident as if it happened yesterday.

It was the best of times...Fourteen years later, on March 21, 1974, Chris was poised to become a first-time father. In the delivery room, he felt the joy of witnessing the birth of his first



Left to Right: Jack Scarola, Greg Barnhart, Chris Searcy, Earl Denney and John Shipley

son, whom he and his wife had agreed to name Henry in honor of Chris’ little brother. It was the worst of times...After hours of labor, it became clear that the delivery was not progressing as quickly as it should be. The doctors decided to speed it up with a high forceps delivery, a practice that was outlawed in the 1960s due to the sheer number of complications associated with it. As a result of this procedure, Henry received a severe brain injury which caused a baby, who otherwise would have been born perfectly healthy, to become autistic.

“Over the course of the years that followed each of those devastating events, I felt overwhelmed; helpless,” explained Searcy. “In both situations, I was supposed to protect my loved ones. Although I know intellectually that there was nothing I could have done differently, emotionally, I still felt like I had failed in the most important job of my life. But due to my experiences, I am unwavering in my determination to represent clients who have suffered personal injury or death due to the negligence of others.”

Delayed Retribution

In 2001, Searcy represented a client whose vehicular collision case drew eerie similarities to that in which Searcy was involved 41 years prior. A mother who was driving her child home from school was broadsided by a speeding car, resulting in the instant death of her 6-year-old child. In this instance, as was the case in Searcy's experience, construction crews had failed to mark the intersection. Because Searcy had lived through a similar tragedy in his own life, he was able to offer comfort and advice from experience. He guided his client through a grueling trial which resulted in a \$50 million award, the largest single verdict for wrongful death at the time in Florida.

"Throughout the course of the trial, everything about the case fell right into place perfectly," said Searcy. "It was an extraordinary feeling to think that, in a way, I was finally able to represent my own family for what had happened so many years ago."

In a similar turn of events, Searcy was approached by a family in 2004 to represent them in a case involving medical malpractice against a doctor who performed a high forceps delivery which resulted in a severe brain injury to their child. As is the case with Searcy's own son, this family's son was able to walk and talk, but in an impaired fashion. Although the doctor's records fail to mention anything about the delivery being high forceps, the family was initially offered \$1000 for pain and suffering. Searcy, however, recognized the signs of this outlawed practice and was able to prove the point in court resulting in a medical malpractice award of \$63 million for his client.

"After 45 years of harboring the misplaced guilt and sadness, being able to win these cases on behalf of my clients brought about a small sense of closure for me," stated Searcy. "Feeling that I could finally represent my little brother and my son after all these years...priceless."

Notable Cases

"I have been incredibly blessed to have been involved in many cases that I would term 'cases of a lifetime,'" noted Searcy. "Although gaining a modicum of closure from the verdicts we received from the vehicular collision and high forceps delivery cases in 2001 and 2004 respectively, several other cases also stand out as career highlights."

- By the age of 30, Searcy had already made a name for himself in Florida as a successful trial attorney by earning three settlements for his clients in excess of \$1 million. In 1977, at 29,

"It was the best of times, it was the worst of times..."

- Charles Dickens, A Tale of Two Cities

Searcy had the distinction of being the youngest lawyer in the United States to achieve a verdict of \$1 million dollars for a single personal injury lawsuit. In this case, Searcy represented a client in Palm Beach County Federal Court, whose legs were cut off at the knee while he was lying on a railroad track. He tried this case against James Payne - his last case before he became a federal judge. In 1978, Searcy represented a client in Ft. Pierce who was hit by a train which resulted in a \$2.5 million verdict. In 1979, in Sanford, Florida, Searcy represented the 75 year-old-father of his secretary at the time, who was broadsided in a vehicular collision, resulting in a verdict of \$1.925 million.

- In 1984, Searcy represented a family whose 15-month-old baby was incorrectly diagnosed and treated by a well-respected pediatrician in Palm Beach County. The pediatrician thought that the baby had a febrile seizure when instead she was seizing because she had become hypovolemic from vomiting and diarrhea, causing dehydration. After treating her incorrectly for an hour to an hour and a half, she was sent to the hospital where a young doctor recognized that she was having seizures and started treating her correctly for that diagnosis. However, when the young doctor went home that night, nobody at the hospital knew how to treat her. The little girl suffered status epilepticus throughout the night causing further brain injury. It was very tough to try the case in the area because the community loved this doctor and there were many horrible editorials written during the course of the trial; however, Searcy secured a \$10.5 million verdict for his clients.

- Searcy also vividly remembers a case in which a 40-year-old mom was driving an Astro van with her two sons-10 and 12-years-old. When a pick-up truck rolled through a stop sign, it forced the van off the roadway at 25 miles per hour. While the two boys escaped with minor injuries, the mom's face and skull were crushed by the steering wheel. Although the mom survived, she now has fluent aphasia, a brain-injury that results in a person being able to pronounce words correctly, but in a virtually meaningless order. It was proven that GM, due to lost market share, wanted to offer more interior space as a result of loss of the crumple zone. After two months of trial against GM, Searcy

"I don't believe that you have to show professional detachment to be a good attorney, especially in my practice areas. Because of my background, I sympathize and empathize with my clients while helping them work through the sadness and sense of loss and helping others understand the profound nature of their loss."

-Chris Searcy



Chris Searcy playing with child at the Easter Seals Child Development Center.

recovered a \$25.5 million verdict for the father plus punitive damages against GM. As a result, GM has reinstated the crumple zone in the front of the vehicle.

- Recently, Searcy represented William and Lili Wilson, the parents of Scott Wilson, who was killed when polo magnate John Goodman sped through a stop sign while under the influence, in a civil trial. Because there are no set guidelines for awards for the wrongful death of an adult child, the settlement could have been all over the board. Searcy settled this case for \$46 million.

Throughout the years, Searcy has advocated on behalf of his clients, solidifying positive verdicts in the courtroom and instigating change in the marketplace through the identification of product safety issues. Outside of the courtroom, Searcy's immense accomplishments are recognized by his peers and professional associations.

Professional Recognition

Throughout his career, Chris Searcy has consistently been recognized for his work both in and out of the courtroom. In 2005, the Florida Justice Association honored him with the Perry Nichols Award in recognition of a lifetime of outstanding service to the cause of justice. Searcy was one of only two

lawyers in the country to receive the "War Horse Award" from the Southern Trials Lawyers Association in 2006, honoring his skill as a trial advocate and his extraordinary contributions to the cause of justice.

A past president of the International Academy of Trial Lawyers, a prestigious worldwide organization limited to 500 attorneys by invitation-only, and named in The Best Lawyers in America, Searcy has also been selected as one of Lawdragon's 500 Leading Lawyers in America. Additionally, Searcy is both a member of the International Society of Barristers, an invitation-only society with only 500 international lawyers and The Inner Circle of Advocates, an invitation-only membership limited to 100 trial lawyers in the United States.

"I am touched that people would care enough to show love, affection and support," said Searcy in regard to his numerous professional accolades.

Charitable Support

Exhibiting admirable compassion in every aspect of his life, his dedication to charitable causes is also noteworthy. Closest to his heart is support of Autism Speaks due to his experiences with his son, Henry. Searcy also supports The Lord's Place (programs to end homelessness), Easter Seals, and MADD, especially in light of his recent involvement with the Goodman case.

Being a survivor of a tragedy can either break you or make you a stronger person with a purpose. For Chris Searcy, the defining moments in his life set him on a path to become a compassionate, successful litigator who has been praised by peers, acknowledged with large verdicts from juries, elected by professional associations and recognized with prestigious awards.

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