

Upping the Ante

Two local lawyers help good people in unfortunate situations.

There's no group more nervous or eager to make a first impression than a class full of first year law students. At Loyola University, in 1997, when professors asked what kind of lawyer the students wanted to be, **Doug Hammel** was stunned by **Bruce Betzer's** response.

"Everyone had these esoteric ideas — a law professor, a judge — but Bruce is the person who shot up and said, 'I want to be a personal injury attorney,'" Hammel says. "There's a stereotype associated with it, but he was ready the first day. It took me a little bit of time to come around to it. I was a prosecutor first ... but everything came together for me after Katrina. I realize we are helping people with their biggest problems every day."

Hammel and Betzer had worked in large, sterile firms, counting copies and waiting for clients to be buzzed inside. They knew that to truly help people they would run things differently in their own firm.

Sure enough, their firm features a comfortable environment with a tight-knit team of longterm employees. Everything that gets in the way of the mission to help good people in unfortunate situations (like charging for time on the phone) has been eliminated. And they are selective about their cases too.

"We've developed a reputation with insurance companies, adjusters and other attorneys that it's not a 'nudge-nudge, wink-wink you're injured' kind of law firm. We're here to help people. If we try to help everybody, we won't help anybody," Hammel says.

They also tell their clients that nobody is going to help them like they can help themselves. Hammel and Betzer take care of pursuing the highest amount of pay-out so clients can focus on getting well. At the end of the day, Hammel says, if the settlement money is gone but you're still in pain, you're not going to be a satisfied client.

Hammel and Betzer have many cases



From left: Sandra Cholmato, receptionist; Jennifer Avallone, associate; Michelle Torres, associate; Douglas Hammel, partner; Bruce C. Betzer, partner; Shanna LaGarde, legal secretary; and Stacie Pomes, paralegal

they're proud of, but among their most challenging and gratifying is a groundbreaking case they fought all the way to the state Supreme Court.

Their client, displaced to Georgia by Hurricane Katrina, informed his insurance company of his return to New Orleans, but his insurance never reflected the change. When badly injured by a motorist without adequate insurance, his insurance company rejected his medical claims, refusing to recognize him as a Louisiana resident. Exploiting nuances in Georgia law, they claimed they were not liable under the ruling *Champagne vs. Ward*. Hammel and Betzer were able to secure a payment well over the client's policy limits. "Champagne still stands as law but ours was the first case to interrupt its procession," Hammel says. "Insurers don't have your best interest at heart. They provide a service; they make money; and they have to answer to shareholders. Lawyers are the last line to defend liberty."

Bruce Betzer Sounds Off

Nowhere but NOLA: "There's an umbilical cord attaching me to this city," he says.

The firm tech guy: "Organization helps me focus," he says. "Paperless systems are really easy to organize, and more importantly, to access from anywhere."

That magic moment: "I was told to cut my hair in public high school despite the fact that I was a straight A student," Betzer says. "I originally wanted to be a musician but got a scholarship and ended up studying history. As for choosing injury law, it was clear that helping others made me feel better about myself."

On Hammel: "Everyone has a friend that brings out the best in them," Betzer says. "Doug is that kind of person ... he makes you feel calm, cool and confident."



Insights from Doug Hammel

Best client compliment: "I trust you," Hammel says.

More than making money: "I was very intentional with the law school I chose," he says.

"Loyola's Jesuit education taught us to bring our heart, intellect and abilities to benefit the community." Hammel is on the board at WWOZ, the Jazz and Heritage Foundation and Loyola Alumni.

Biggest difference between he and Betzer: Hammel's family was in management, while Betzer's family was in local government. "Besides being a born plaintiff's attorney, he comes from more of a community, socialist background," Hammel says. "Everybody pitches in and works harder but everyone also shares and gets a piece of it if we do well."

Lessons learned from Division I soccer at American University: Deadlines, time constraints and the ability to perform under pressure. "If I have somewhere to be and something to do, I perform better than if you give me a week," Hammel says.



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