

How Richard Schwamm Found His Voice

A childhood speech impediment couldn't derail his dreams BY CAROL TICE

As a Fort Lauderdale middle-schooler, Richard Schwamm was afflicted with both a severe stutter and a lisp so bad, he says, it was "put-on-the-trench-coat" time for those around him.

"It was horrible, and put me at an incredible disadvantage," Schwamm recalls. "I became more shy and withdrawn. Kids back then were really, really, really cruel."

For eight years, Schwamm dutifully attended daily speech therapy, but there was no change in his lisp, or in the 30-second delay before he could haltingly voice his thoughts. By high school, he'd had enough. He quit speech therapy, sat himself down, and gradually trained himself out of both speech impediments by practicing techniques such as slowing down as he spoke.

And just as he found his voice, he took a class his senior year that would set his future course.

Street Law was taught by students from nearby Nova Southeastern University—and the class culminated with a tri-county mock trial competition. Testing his newfound confidence in his speaking ability, Schwamm made his school's team.

"I thought what lawyers did was cool," he says. "I wanted to be Atticus Finch."

With his parents looking on, his team made the finals of the two-day event. Schwamm was assigned to cross-examination. When his student witness made a mistake with her testimony, he says, he went after her like a bulldog, and she lost it.

He was stunned. After all, it hadn't been that long since he'd struggled just to *talk*.

The plaque from his mock-trial win still adorns his desk at Orlando firm Haliczzer Pettis & Schwamm. There's also a framed print portraying a lawyer as a bulldog—another reminder of that victory.

It's been a long road to becoming the confident trial lawyer he is today, often helping families that have suffered terrible losses in child-injury and death cases.

From Stetson University College of Law, he was hired by the firm now called Bobo Ciotoli White & Russell, where he practiced medical malpractice defense law, then spun out with a small group of attorneys from another firm to carve his own path.

With his own childhood struggles behind him, Schwamm found himself drawn to catastrophic-injury cases, many of which involve children. As his interest in representing families grew, his client base



switched three years ago from a mix of plaintiff and defense to pure plaintiff.

These are tragic cases involving families who have either lost a child or have a seriously disabled child, frequently due to medical negligence during birth. It can also be a child who lost a finger in a fence while under a sitter's care, or an infant who died after being put face-down for a nap at day care.

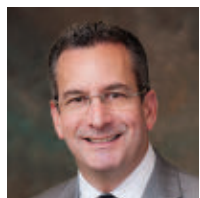
"I want to help that family get whatever measure of justice we can," he says, "whether it's a settlement or creating change."

In one notable settlement, he represented a 5-month-old with heart problems whose recovery from surgery was bungled by a young nurse, leaving the baby with permanent brain damage.

"With the settlement, [the baby] will never want for anything, even after the parents die," Schwamm says. "Representing Fortune 500 companies doesn't scratch the same itches."

After work, Schwamm devotes his free time to being a very hands-on parent, along with wife Stacey, to daughters Aubrey and Alexa, now 11 and 13; and to speaking publicly about accident prevention for groups such as Safe Kids Worldwide, Safe Kids Orange County and Children's Safety Village of Central Florida.

It was after his first daughter was born, Schwamm says, that he began reassessing how he wanted to spend his professional time. "I have an opportunity to help other kids through advocacy," he says. "I see a lot of injured kids. And if parents think I don't know what their kid's going through? I had to learn to become an advocate for myself, and now I want to be an advocate for others." **SL**



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