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TRUE TO HIS ROOTS

by Matt Cosentino
photos by Alison Dunlap

PERSONAL INJURY ATTORNEY **MICHAEL BARBIERO** COMES FROM A WORKING-CLASS FAMILY AND COMMUNITY, WHERE HE HONED HIS WORK ETHIC, BECAME MENTALLY TOUGH, AND DEVELOPED AN APPETITE FOR FIGHTING FOR THE UNDERDOG.

"Once I start trying to help somebody, I'm all in. Of course the law is the foundation, but I'm just trying to help somebody solve a problem. This isn't just what I do, it's who I am."

A partner at Clarke Gallagher Barbiero Amuso & Glassman Law who focuses his practice on plaintiffs personal injury cases, Barbiero has been practicing his problem-solving philosophy for all of his nearly three decades as a lawyer.

It's a career he never quite imagined for himself while growing up in Bristol.

Barbiero inherited his work ethic from his parents—his father, an Italian immigrant who worked 12-hour days as a union laborer and roofer, and his mother, who taught at Pennsbury High School and earned her master's degree while attending night classes. Their example taught him that preparation, persistence, and treating people with respect are not optional.

After Penn State, he worked for several years with juveniles at drug- and alcohol-treatment facilities around Philadelphia. Seeing young people and their families struggle to understand a system with life-altering consequences helped lead him to law school.

He credits a clerkship with the President Judge of the Philadelphia Court of Common Pleas, the Honorable Alex Bonavitala, and the tutelage of renowned trial attorney Bernard Smalley early in his career for shaping the lawyer he is today.

"I've gotten really lucky with my mentors," he says. "Judge Bonavitala was like a second father to me—a brilliant man, but also down to earth, a South Philly neighborhood guy. Bernie is the consummate gentleman, but that never kept him from being one of

Whether it's his working-class background, his Italian heritage, or his overall affable nature, Michael Barbiero is the rare attorney who always seems approachable and eager to engage in conversation about the law. In fact, he's been known to share his cell phone number with clients and will spend as long as necessary talking them through an issue, even during off hours.

"Other attorneys tell me I'm crazy to give out my cell number, but that's just the way I am," Barbiero says with a laugh.

the most formidable trial lawyers in Philadelphia. They both taught me that being an effective lawyer isn't about being the loudest guy in the room. It's about preparation, judgment, knowing people, and being persistent."

Barbiero began his career on the defense side of litigation, experience that still informs the way he evaluates cases today. He understands how insurance companies assess risk, investigate claims, and decide whether to resolve a case or fight it.

He ultimately found his fit representing injured people and families and now, as a respected litigator and experienced trial attorney, focuses his practice on personal injury, wrongful death, catastrophic injury, and municipal litigation.

Because many of his clients have never been in a lawyer's office before, he strives to speak to them in a welcoming manner without complex legal terms.

"No matter how complicated a case is, I need to be able to explain it to 12 [jurors]," he says. "If I can't explain to my client what's going on, I'm not going to be able to explain it to a jury. I grew up around people who worked hard for everything they had, and nobody likes being talked down to. To me, that's a matter of respect. A client shouldn't need a law degree to understand his or her own case. My job is to give people straight answers, explain their options, and make sure they never



feel lost in the process. At the end of the day, I work for them.”

Barbiero has helped secure millions of dollars through verdicts and settlements for injured clients and their families, including a \$9 million settlement arising from a catastrophic bus/truck accident and a \$4 million verdict involving the death of a child at a daycare. That said, he is the first to point out that his past results do not guarantee future success, that every case depends upon its particular facts and circumstances. Sadly, those numbers mean nothing compared to the losses his clients have endured.

“Those numbers never tell the whole

story,” he says. “When someone has lost a child or suffered a catastrophic injury, no amount of money makes it right. What we can do is pursue accountability, help provide financial security, and hope that safer choices come from it.”

Barbiero, who also handles a significant amount of municipal litigation, still enjoys being in court. He prepares every case as if it’s going all the way to trial.

“The preparation is what I enjoy most,” he says. “Trying to figure out how I’m going to explain a case to a jury, how all of the pieces fit together, that’s the fun part. Most cases settle, but I never prepare them assuming they will.”

One of the video testimonials on Barbiero’s website is from a former client who raves about her experience with his firm: “All I can say is, I felt like I was being treated like family. ... They listen, you never feel rushed. When you have a call or question, [Barbiero] gets right back to you. I recommend them to friends and family and you would be blessed to use them.”

Such feedback is a great source of pride for him.

“As a first-generation Italian American, I’ve never forgotten where I came from. I was raised by a schoolteacher and a union guy who spoke in broken English, not lawyers,” he says. “I treat people the way I would have wanted my parents to be treated if they had to go to a lawyer when I was growing up.”

Today, Barbiero also mentors younger lawyers, passing along the same lessons that shaped him: Prepare relentlessly, listen closely, and never lose sight of the person behind the file.

While many attorneys are quick to discourage young people from entering the field, Barbiero takes the opposite approach.

“I love this work because I can actually help people,” he says. “I’ve been fortunate to learn from some of the best, but eventually you have to take what they taught you and make it your own. I work hard, I prepare, and I try to stay true to who I am. Do I lean into the working-class story? I suppose I do, but I’m proud of it.”

For Barbiero, that means remembering the uncertainty he saw growing up in a working-class household—the feeling of not knowing what to do when a serious problem suddenly lands at your door.

“A lot of people feel that way after an injury, when they are dealing with doctors, insurance companies, and lawyers,” he says. “I have not forgotten that feeling. I want clients to know they will get straight answers and they will not pay a fee unless we recover for them. When I take a case, I fight for that person like they are family.” ■



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