

FINANCIAL & LEGAL SERVICES

At 80, a longtime attorney is just getting his second wind

By ELAINE HESSER

ONE WONDER whether actor Raymond Burr knew that his most famous TV character, Perry Mason, was a bit of a unicorn — a universally admired defense attorney. Of course Mason also had the moral luxury of usually representing innocent clients.

In real life, defense attorneys frequently find themselves vilified. Johnnie Cochran (OJ Simpson), Leslie Abramson (one of the Melendez brothers) and Irving Kanarek (Charles Manson) — to name a few — have been pilloried for their work. Larry Biegel, a longtime local defense attorney who has recently pivoted

more toward personal injury, has a ready, if complicated, answer to the obvious question:

How on earth can you represent guilty people?

Biegel, 80, passed the state bar in 1969. He worked for the public defender's office in Los Angeles for a few years, then moved here in 1975 with his wife, Tina (who also



Larry Biegel

became a lawyer), after visiting Carmel on vacation.

Protecting rights

In 1977, while working in the Monterey County Public Defender's Office, he was assigned to defend 19-year-old Harold Bicknell, who was subsequently convicted of the gruesome murders of four relatives, including a 6-year-old child, in Seaside.

In such cases — particularly those that could result in the death penalty — Biegel explained, "I realized that if I didn't defend my clients with vigor, I made myself their judge and jury, and, ultimately, their executioner." He said he became convinced on several occasions that clients he initially thought were guilty, were, in fact, innocent.

"Innocent people get themselves into weird situations," he said. He pointed to the Innocence Project, a nonprofit which since 1992 has used DNA evidence to exonerate 375 people on death rows nationwide. Biegel believes everyone deserves to have their rights protected. "A doctor who sees a patient with marks on his arm from using heroin can't decide not to help him. I will mess up the system if I don't do my job."

He said he went into private practice because he wanted to work with different aspects of the law. Since then, he's represented plaintiffs in some high-profile, controversial cases, including that of motorcyclist Adam Rogers, who hit a wild boar on Highway 1 in 2003 and ended up wheel chair-bound and suffering from severe memory loss.

Although his client had a blood-alcohol level of more than .10 percent, Biegel convinced the jury that wasn't a major factor in the accident. Rather, he argued, the state

had created — and allowed to continue — a dangerous situation in which wild pigs frequently crossed the road at that spot. According to Biegel's website, Rogers was awarded \$8.6 million, "one of the largest verdicts in Monterey County history."

Another client, Jimmy Anderson, interned in Biegel's law office before heading off to law school in Wisconsin. While on a break in summer 2010, Anderson was home in Stanislaus County when his entire family was in a tragic car crash. T-boned by a drunk driver who ran a stop sign at 70 mph, the young man lost his mother, father and brother. The driver of the vehicle that hit them was also killed. Anderson was left a quadriplegic.

In researching the accident, Biegel said he discovered that 134 locals had previously petitioned the county to put in a four-way stop at that intersection, citing safety concerns over a lack of visibility. The case was settled for \$8.25 million. Anderson finished law school and is a member of the Wisconsin State Assembly.

The list goes on — land disputes, divorces, products liability and more. In each case, depending on whose side you agree with, Biegel is either a hero or a villain. The roller coaster is enough to take the wind out of anyone's sails. Over time, Biegel began to worry that he was losing his. Wind, that is.

Don't give in

About the time the Covid-19 pandemic broke out in 2020, Biegel said he'd been hiking with friends when he noticed they had to keep stopping to wait for him because he was out of breath. Since Covid is a respiratory illness, he thought it might be a good idea to improve the fitness of his



Pausing during this year's Big Sur Marathon Big Sur 12-mile run/walk.

lungs.

He started walking 5 miles every morning on a route that took him from his home near Highway 1 to Carmel Point and back. He figures he's logged more than 5,000 miles since then. Two weeks ago, he ran, walked and jogged the 12-mile race during the Big Sur Marathon.

"I'm not giving in to age," he asserted firmly, noting that he was first in his age division, 80 and above. "There were only three of us," he laughed.

As far as retirement, he said he "can't even spell the word." He said he wanted to be a doctor until a high school chemistry teacher pointed out "how little I understood about chemistry." "Being a lawyer, I'm not a life saver. But I can serve people and make their lives better," he said.

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