HONORED: Daniel J. Callahan of Laguna Niguel was named Lawyer of the Year by the Orange County Trialers Association.

Winning attitude pays off

Dan Callahan named Orange County Trial Lawyer of the Year after record jury award

By AMANDA STRINDBERG
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Dan Callahan hates to lose. “Maybe I have a problem,” the Laguna Niguel resident said. “Maybe I attach winning too much with my self-worth.”

It is this mentality that brought him the $934 million jury verdict on behalf of Fullerton-based Beckman Coulter, Inc. in a breach of contract suit against circuit board maker Flextronics International Ltd. of Singapore about a year ago.

“Now that was a good day,” said Callahan managing partner of Callahan & Blaine law corporation based in Santa Ana. “That was definitely the big one.”

According to Callahan it was the largest jury award in the history of Orange County, the largest in California in 2003 and the second largest award in the nation for the year.

The Orange County Trialers Association recently named Callahan Orange County Trial Lawyer of the Year.

But winning takes effort and Callahan says that’s what makes him good. “You have to do what’s required and do everything you can to win for your client,” Callahan said. “Even if it means working late and working weekends. You can’t say, 'It’s 5 p.m. I have to go home for meatloaf.'”

For Callahan there are no “oh well’s.” He says he uses his creativity to think outside the box, evening if it means renting a jet to get to the courthouse in Palm Springs after a last minute call from a friend saying his hotel is going to be foreclosed.

“I like to analyze people’s problems and help people find a solution,” Callahan said. “Especially when they think there isn’t one. You can always look at something from a different angle.”

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Lawyer: Hard work, dedication paying off

Callahan says one of the biggest mistakes most lawyers make is forgetting they can create the law and set precedents.

This is how he won $930 million of the $934 million jury verdict, claiming economic duress for potential damages.

Beckman Coulter, a biomedicai testing company, sued Flextronics in 2001, claiming the company failed to fulfill a contract to make parts for its major product, a blood analyzer used by hospitals and medical labs to diagnose illnesses. The case began as a typical breach of contract case, but later Callahan filed a fraud claim and then added a claim of economic duress as more evidence emerged during the testimony.

According to Callahan, Flextronics refused to return needed parts to Beckman unless the company also bought other parts from Flextronics that had no value or use to Beckman.

Claiming economic duress for potential damages that Beckman would have suffered if it couldn't get the parts it needed resulted in an additional $980 million judgement.

Beckman Coulter and Flextronics later reached a $23 million settlement in the case, but according to Callahan the settlement is still the highest punitive damage award ever paid in California.

Maybe it is the luck of the Irish that is with Callahan.

The lawyer opened his law firm on his own in St. Patrick's Day in 1984, despite that it fell on a Saturday.

Or maybe Callahan is just good and goes into every case well prepared.

Callahan claims he can win any business case.

"A month prior to a trial I go on lockdown working 17 hour days, with a do not disturb sign on my door," he said.

"When I go into trial I am one ready guy."

But despite his large jury verdict, there are still goals to be reached.

"I haven't had a billion dollar verdict yet so I've still got something to shoot for - so that's good," he said.

More recently Callahan has begun to take on more personal injury cases.

The shift began in 2002, after Callahan won $125 million for a client who suffered serious brain injury after a tire of an 18-wheeler slammed onto the roof of his truck, crushing his skull.

"In personal injury cases, there is really a victim and someone needs help," Callahan said. "It just feels good."

Since winning the $23 million verdict, Callahan began volunteering to help the mentally disabled working with several organizations and sitting on the board of directors for Coastline Community College, which has a Brain Injury Institute.

"It brings a tear to your eye to see what some of these students overcome," he said.

Not only does Callahan have more time to volunteer now, but he also makes sure to spend plenty of time with his children and reap the benefits of his hard work.

Callahan is no longer working 60-hour workweeks.

He isn't in the office on weekends or after 7 p.m.

And he makes sure to take plenty of vacations. Some of his favorite spots include traveling in Spain, Africa, Ireland and Panama.

The lawyer also indulges in fine suits and has a personal tailor who numbers his shoes, belts, ties and suits putting together a chart of what numbers work best with each other.

"Today is a number nine belt and shoe day," Callahan explains. "Accompanied by suit number 28 and tie five."

But Callahan emphasizes the number system isn't because the lawyer can't dress, but because he is colorblind.

But personal tailors and exotic vacations weren't always a part of Callahan's lifestyle.

He is from a lower middle-class family and born and raised in Chicago. There were no trips and no dinners out.

The high-powered attorney was once digging ditches for a living.

Contact the writer at astrindberg@ocregister.com or (949) 454-7367.

After high school Callahan worked for the city of Elmhurst, climbing trees with a chain saw and breaking up sidewalks with a jackhammer.

"After chopping down enough trees I began to think, 'what the hell am I doing? I want a job where I am paid to think.'"

So Callahan decided to go to college with the goal of getting good grades so he could get into law school.

Feeling inferior to many of the students Callahan worked extra hard, earning straight As and acceptance into the University California, Davis, School of Law.

"Coming from a background like mine does build a certain character," Callahan said. "I know the value of a dollar and I don't just throw money away."

Although Callahan may sit in an office on the ninth floor of the Callahan and Blaine building with dark leather furniture and mahogany wood, he still enjoys some of the simpler things in life.

"I still like my canned ravioli," he said. "And I've been eating the same lean cuisine for lunch for the past eight years, chicken carbonara. Now that's good."