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ATTORNEY AT LAW

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Dennis Wilenchik

On Life, the Law and Being Known as a Tough Guy

By Paula Hubbs Cohen

I knew this would be an interesting interview when one of the first things Dennis Wilenchik said to me was this:

“Hal Linden of *Barney Miller* was a really nice guy, Dick Clark swore like a sailor but was very cool, Mr. Green Jeans was super and would hang out with everybody, but Captain Kangaroo was not friendly at all. He would not fraternize with the pages and wouldn’t allow you to take anyone to his studios.”

At this point, you’re probably wondering how Captain Kangaroo and Mr. Green Jeans even came up in a conversation with one of Arizona’s preeminent litigators – a guy whose nickname is ‘Bulldog’ and whose tough, gruff, ‘nuff-said reputation is well-known and thoroughly documented.

We’ll get there, but first, let’s hit the rewind button and head back a few years.

Fate and Fateful Decisions

Life started for Dennis Wilenchik in Brooklyn, New York. Determined to make it in some aspect of show business, Wilenchik snagged a coveted position as a Page at the venerable CBS studios in Manhattan – and that’s where he met celebrities ranging from legendary newscaster Walter Cronkite to Bob Keeshan of Captain Kangaroo fame. But after earning his undergraduate degree in speech and theater with high honors at Brooklyn College, part of the City University of New York, a family tragedy put a hold on his show biz aspirations. “Right after college, my cousins were raped at gunpoint in front of their parents. So I moved to Scottsdale to help them out,” he says. “When it came time to leave, I applied to law school and that was part of the reason I wanted to become an attorney. I thought the system was broken.”

This was in December and the only law school accepting January admissions then was South Texas College of Law in Houston, Texas. So off this born-and-bred New Yorker went to the Lone Star state.

County Attorney’s Office

Armed with his J.D., he returned to Phoenix in 1977. “While dealing with my cousins’ ordeal, I had met Chuck Hyder and at that time, Chuck had just been elected Maricopa County Attorney,” recalls Wilenchik. “After I passed the Bar, he broke a hiring freeze to hire me, which caused a big hubbub in the press. While I was at the County Attorney’s office, I worked like a demon and tried 13 jury trials in less than 13 months. Later, Chuck promoted me to the Special Operations Division handling white collar crime and it was around that time that I had an epiphany. Life as a prosecutor was not for me, and I needed to do something else.”

Wilenchik went into private practice for about a year and then joined Storey and Ross, a fledgling firm, where

Dennis Wilenchik



Dennis Wilenchik, left and Becky Bartness, right



he later became a senior partner and head of litigation supervising about 20 litigators at a young age. "Within about six or seven years, the firm had grown from five to approximately 50 lawyers, and after about the tenth year, we merged with Squire Sanders & Dempsey where I became a senior partner," he says. "I still did some white collar criminal cases, but mainly complex litigation work in the real estate and corporate field. But working at a big law firm was not for me."

Going Entrepreneurial

Wilenchik notes that he gets too wrapped up in his work sometimes. "I can be too zealous and it isn't healthy. I decided to open my own firm because I thought it would let me slow down a bit. But it hasn't quite worked out that way."

In 1991, Wilenchik and his wife, Becky Bartness, opened Wilenchik & Bartness. Bartness, who, at the time, was General Counsel of Chase Bank of Arizona, had been a federal court law clerk for Judge Cordova and then an associate at Evans, Kitchel and Jenckes. A certified real estate specialist

"Clients just love him. He'll do 110 percent on the smallest case to the largest. He can seem gruff at times, but he's very kindhearted."

— Ann Scott Timmer, Chief Judge of the Arizona Court of Appeals, Division One

for many years, she has recently decided to begin writing mystery novels, five of which have now been published. Bartness currently practices part-time for the firm, which has grown to over a dozen attorneys and three paralegals.

Motivations and Strengths

A top-notch courtroom pugilist, Wilenchik, who is also a nationally certified civil trial advocate, says he is motivated by the fact that there are evil, dishonest people in the world who need to be taught a lesson. "This includes lawyers, and they need to be dealt with by those that have the intestinal fortitude to stand up to them. Otherwise, the world would be overrun with evil, because it never sleeps," he says.

To that end, this former chairman of the State Bar Trial Practice Section takes on seemingly toxic cases that other lawyers might not want to touch with a proverbial ten-foot pole. "My problem, or strength, depending on your point of view, is that I identify with people's problems no matter who they are. I mean no offense but it's just in my nature to be a fighter in order to resolve their problems," this ultra-aggressive litigator says. "My view is that we should encourage all lawyers to fight more for their clients and identify with their issues. It's important to let the client know that they can sleep at night while you are worrying about their case."

While he has been involved in numerous high-profile cases, a case that happened years ago disturbs him to this day. "I am very tough in court, but the truth is I've got a very soft heart, and what happened in this case was so egregiously senseless, it still eats at me," he says. "I was appointed to defend a Native American woman against a charge of murdering a federal postal worker. Mel McDonald, then U.S. Attorney for the District of Arizona, personally handled the matter and it was front-page news. I visited the defendant in jail and she told me that she had been so drunk that she honestly could not remember what happened. The friends she was with picked up the victim just because they had nothing better to do, and someone in the car murdered him for no good reason."

Wilenchik says that he remembers feeling what a waste of life this was for both the victim and the

defendant. "I withdrew from the case despite being told it was a huge opportunity for a young lawyer. After that experience, I never handled another criminal case as a defense attorney unless I really believed in it."

And Finally...

Wilenchik, who is also licensed in Texas, says that he hopes that the younger lawyers he has dealt with and trained over the years who have gone on to work in government, to start their own firms, to become judges and politicians and more, are still fighting for what is right regardless of the odds. "As the song goes, they can stand me up to the gates of hell and I won't back down, and that is the indomitable spirit I hope they emulate," he says.

When the going gets tough, Wilenchik says that you have to pick yourself up and keep on fighting. "You have to let your clients know you believe in them and their cause and that it is not just about money," he says. "I've made a fantastic living but I will be doing this till the end because I love helping people whether they appreciate it or not."

At the end of the day, Wilenchik says that he simply loves seeing justice done. "It's really that basic for me. Whenever I lose sight of it in the heat of the moment, I bring myself back to that," he says, adding that he takes after his grandfather who was a boxer before he became a policeman. "His fighting spirit is definitely in me, but I never throw the first punch and I always give every benefit of the doubt. However, if you reject my peace offering, I'm not Jesus and I don't turn the other cheek."



Dennis Wilenchik at the mic on "Legal-ease," KFNX 1100 AM

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At a Glance

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Education

Brooklyn College of the City University of New York, B.A. degree, magna cum laude, 1974
South Texas College of Law, J.D., 1977

Affiliations, Ratings and Memberships

Former Chairman of the State Bar Trial Practice Section
Civil Judge pro tem, Maricopa County Superior Court
Former President, Maricopa County Bar Association Young Lawyers Division
Former Board Member, Arizona Bar Journal
Past Member, Superior Court Civil Study Committee of the State Bar
Past Member, County Bar Judicial Evaluation Poll Committee
Past Member, County Bar Continuing Legal Education Committee
Past Member, County Bar Professionalism Committee
Past Member, Trial Practice and Evidence Committees, American Bar Association
Past Diplomat, Hasting's College of Law Trial Advocacy Program and the National College of Advocacy Trial Advocacy Program
Past Commercial Arbitrator, American Arbitration Association

Admissions

A member of the Arizona and Texas bars and licensed in the District of Arizona and southern, western and northern districts of Texas as well as the Ninth Circuit and U.S. Supreme Court

Personal

Married to Becky Bartness, his law partner
Two children, one a law student and one a sophomore at the University of Arizona
A half-poodle/half Shih Tzu named Gladys and an English Bulldog named Lily

Favorite Quote

"Never give in, never give in, never, never, never, never - in nothing, great or small, large or petty - never give in except to convictions of honour and good sense." ... Winston Churchill

Future Plans

To write a tell-all book about his life in the law.