

# STEPHAN BLANDIN

## Fighting Corporate Decision-Making in the Medical Arena

by Elizabeth Davies



Stephan D. Blandin was that 11-year-old kid who watched the Watergate hearings instead of baseball games.

Today, he's a bulldog plaintiff's lawyer at Romanucci & Blandin, LLC—taking that same hard-nosed edge that dismantled a presidency and systematically uncovering the medical mistakes that injured his clients.

"This is the industry where the current battle is being fought," says Blandin, 57. "Today, doctors have an incentive to mass produce results, and they end up making mistakes. We just started to see a lot of it."

Blandin thinks back to the first liability case that caught his attention, the Ford Pinto. In that case, Ford came under controversy following several deadly fires that started after rear-end collisions. The company was accused of using a faulty fuel system design to save production costs.

All told, Ford's recall of the Pinto was the largest of its kind to that point. The company was subjected to 117 lawsuits, including several major liability claims.

"That is what we're seeing in the medical

industry now," he says.

That's why Blandin is passionate about fighting medical malpractice and negligence as a way to increase the quality of health care in the United States.

"Doctors aren't gods, they're just like all of us," he says. "What I've found behind almost all of these tragic results is human error."

While he focuses on birth injury cases, Blandin also is knowledgeable in wrongful death litigation concerning motor vehicles and airplane crashes.

His desire to make things right on behalf of his clients isn't missed by opposing counsel. Sherri Arrigo of Donohue Brown Mathewson & Smyth LLC has gone up against Blandin in several medical malpractice cases.

"Stephan stands out because not only is he an extremely talented and skilled lawyer but he also takes his cases very much to heart," she says. "He truly cares about his clients, especially children, and he looks out for their interests first and foremost. I am aware that he stays in touch with families even after their cases have been resolved.

"Stephan doesn't take a case unless he truly believes in it. While we may—and generally do—disagree about the merits of the cases we have had together, I know Stephan is always sincere and honest about his position."

### OVERCOMING THE ODDS

Given his track record of success, you might not guess that Blandin grew up with the instability of a broken home.

At age 7, his parents divorced. His mother moved to the state of Oregon, his father to Chicago. They held a series of jobs over the years, and Blandin struggled to connect with either of them. Finally, at just 16 years old, he moved out on his own. Along with a friend, he lived in the basement of a 12-flat building, doing maintenance work on behalf of the owner.

"There was never a doubt in my mind that I would go to college," Blandin remembers. His godfather was a corporate lawyer, and his grandfather was a university professor. He found the adult mentors who would encourage and guide him to a profession all his own.

Blandin studied political science at DePaul University on a combination of scholarships, grants and school loans. He was a resident advisor during his senior year when, along with a group of other boys, he saw a girl being attacked at the nearby El station. The boys ran out and stopped the attack, garnering the attention and praise of school administrators.

"The university president said, 'If there's ever anything I can do for you,'" Blandin recalls. "I told him my grades weren't the best, but I could use a letter of recommendation to the law school."

Indeed, Blandin continued on at DePaul's School of Law, where a product liability class during his third year piqued his interest. They were studying that famed Ford Pinto case.

"The idea that corporate America was making a decision that people's lives were worth 'x' because it would save money was mind-boggling," he says.

As he studied at DePaul, Blandin also clerked for the longtime and highly respected Chicago litigator Geoff Gifford, who passed away in February 2019. There, Blandin was given hands-on assignments in product liability and malpractice cases, working alongside Gifford and learning the intricacies of his practice. From the get-go, Gifford appreciated Blandin's organizational skills, work ethic, focus and passion for advocating on behalf of his client.

When interviewed in 2018 by *Leading Lawyers*, Gifford was working in office space at Blandin's firm. So, Gifford saw Blandin regularly and had an even greater appreciation for his daily work ethic.

"His focus is unbelievably sharp," Gifford said. "He's very dedicated to his clients, works very hard, and has had some very substantial verdicts."

## FIGHTING FOR JUSTICE

Even today, Blandin feels compelled to fight corporate decision-making. For the past 10 years, that has meant his practice focused heavily on medical malpractice. In that arena, he's secured dozens of million-dollar verdicts and settlements.

There was the \$30 million settlement for a boy who was permanently disabled following 25 experimental surgeries. Another \$22.3 million went to the family of a 10-year-old boy who now has permanent disabilities.

In the case of *Vernon Hudson v. the City of Chicago*, a jury awarded more than \$17.5 million to Blandin's client. At the time, it was the largest jury verdict against the Chicago Police Department.

Hudson had pulled his car to the side of the road to move out of the way of an unauthorized police chase. However, one officer lost control of his vehicle and hit Hudson's car while it was sitting there. That impact left him with

quadriplegia.

Blandin also represented baby Jake, who was born with congenital heart defects and underwent his first procedure at just a few days of age. When complications arose later, his mother swiftly brought him to the hospital for care.

"She was sitting in what, by all accounts, should have been a very good medical institution," Blandin recalls.

Yet, it was a holiday weekend and the staff were moving slowly. While baby Jake and his mother sat in the waiting room, he suffered a stroke. It caused him to lose a leg and left him with a profound brain injury.

"When you win a case for someone whose life has been torn apart and they feel vindicated, that is huge," Blandin says.

Most of Blandin's trials last two or three weeks, as he attempts to win over a jury by boiling his

case down to the elements most people can relate to: The victim is someone's child, and the person or company at fault promoted profit over safety.

But he's found that choosing a jury has become more challenging over time. Younger generations maintain different values. "You can never really tell what someone else is thinking," he says.

Likewise, the diverse pool of jurors in Cook County can make it difficult to appeal to all 12 people. That's where he comes back to delivering his case in a way that connects to people on a basic, human level.

"We're in a really interesting time," he says. "The idea that someone on the South Side or West Side has the same values as someone in Winnetka is just not true. The racial and socioeconomic diversity is more prevalent than it's ever been, and it plays into all of these cases."



Blandin and wife Cindy Blandin share a moment at a colleague's wedding in May 2014.



The Blandin children in California for 2017 wedding of son Adam. From left: daughter Elly, Adam and wife Kristen Granger, son Jack, daughter Lindsey



Romanucci & Blandin 2011 photo. From left: Antonio Romanucci, Richard Pellegrino, Hon. Bruno J. Tassone (Ret.), Blandin

### BEYOND THE BULLDOG

To Blandin, there's no point in making friends with opposing counsel.

"I don't fall into the camp that likes my opponent," he says. "It's an adversarial process for a reason. You have to take things personally—at least I do—otherwise, you don't give it your all."

So, in cases where tensions and stakes both run high, Blandin brings his highest level of intensity. He sometimes gets loud, he sometimes gets stubborn—but he often gets his way.

"When I'm being sworn at, I know I'm being effective," he says.

For about 20 years, one of those opponents has been H. Patrick Morris of Johnson & Bell, Ltd. He has gone against Blandin in several high-profile, multimillion dollar cases that had unique legal challenges and circumstances. In those cases, Blandin showed himself to be far beyond a run-of-the-mill lawyer.

"We pride ourselves on being able to outwork our opponents, but you cannot outwork Stephan," Morris says. "We presented many obstacles, a new one every week—some factual, some legal. He was required to work very hard to navigate the defenses we put up. Lesser lawyers will quit or try to settle or shortcut the workup. He refuses to give up. There is no hint of abating."

While adversaries, Morris acknowledges that Blandin is technically remarkable, while still tenacious, resolute, purposeful and tireless.

But with three decades of legal practice under his belt, Blandin feels it might be time to take it down a few notches.

"In this stage of my life, I'm trying to learn to be nicer," he says. "I try to give people the benefit of the doubt from the outset."

In short, he wants to be a little more like his

wife of 32 years, Cindy. Blandin credits Cindy, an optimist, with being the glue in his life.

"I've known her for 37 years," Blandin says. "I'm not sure how she has put up with me all these years. She is my rock and our family's compass."

Though she holds a master's degree in endocrinology, Cindy stayed home to give the family stability as they raised four children.

**“ He is doggedly determined to find justice anywhere he can for the victims of injustice. He may not always be the most-liked plaintiff’s attorney among the defense bar, but I will bet you he is extremely well respected.”**

Today, they are the proud parents of an economist, a student in a doctorate program, a special education major, and a lawyer who just took the bar exam.

"We told all of them they couldn't be lawyers," Blandin says, adding that he didn't want his children to undergo the kind of stress he experiences in his practice. "But she's the one who is the rebel of the family."

Professionally, Blandin feels he is just now hitting his stride. His firm has more trials on its schedule than ever before. Blandin himself managed three medical malpractice trials in late 2018 alone.

"This year is going to be the most intense year our practice has ever had," he says.

Years ago, Blandin eyeballed fellow lawyer Antonio Romanucci as someone he would

like to go into business with. He suggested a meeting to discuss the idea—just to find out that Romanucci had been considering the same.

It was at that meeting that their firm was born. With their initial agreement handwritten on a napkin from the Palace Grill, the lawyers set about building a firm based on seeking justice in catastrophic personal injury cases.

Romanucci knew from the onset that he was going into business with a lawyer who wasn't out to make friends but who had deep compassion for those who had been wronged.

"He is doggedly determined to find justice anywhere he can for the victims of injustice we represent," Romanucci says. "He may not always be the most-liked plaintiff's attorney among the defense bar, but I will bet you he is extremely well respected because he does not give up, ever."

Since 1998, Romanucci & Blandin has been known as a firm that fights for justice in personal injury cases. They have secured more than \$500 million in recoveries for their clients. Last year, Romanucci was the lead lawyer on a complex pattern and practice case against the city of Chicago. Knowing his partner faced an extensive witness list, Blandin sat in on every day of the trial.

"As he saw that I was getting worn down by the grind of examining so many witnesses, he immediately jumped in and took some of the pressure off me so I could prepare for the more difficult witnesses," Romanucci recalls. "He learned the nuances of the case in days and turned out to be a tremendous help and resource."

The pair have found their opposing personalities served them well in working together.

"He's Felix, and I'm Oscar. He's the good cop, and I'm the bad cop," Blandin says. "We complement each other really well. I'm fortunate to have

him as a partner." ■



From left in 2006: Antonio Romanucci, U.S. Senator John Kerry, Blandin