

# Debra Freid

## A Lifelong Passion for Protecting the Injured

by Dave Argentar



SAGINAW — With fascination and awe, Debra A. Freid once watched her father do his job. Bernie Freid, a prominent Detroit workers' compensation attorney, would bring his daughter to his office and to hearings where she saw him thunder away on behalf of his injured clients, noting his skill as an advocate and his passion for what he did for a living.

"My dad was a tremendous lawyer; one of the best cross-examiners I have ever seen," Freid recalls. "I learned so much from him."

Freid took those lessons learned as a young girl, combined them with a tireless work ethic and a fierce drive to help those who need it most, and built her own impressive and impactful legacy as an employment law and personal injury lawyer. A founding partner of **Freid, Gallagher, Taylor & Associates, P.C.** in Saginaw, she says the essence of what drew her to the plaintiffs' bar isn't complicated.

"I very much wanted to make a meaningful difference in someone's life long-term," she says.

### 'I Owe Her My Life'

Val Gemmell will tell you about the meaningful difference Freid made in her life after she was seriously injured in a horrific motorcycle accident. A self-described "things happen" type who had never met with a lawyer much less considered a lawsuit, Gemmell reached out to Freid only after the relentless nagging of a friend who had referred Freid to her.

"One of the best decisions I ever made," Gemmell says. "Quite simply, I owe her my life."

Through multiple surgeries and countless medical appointments for traumatic brain injury and other debilitating conditions, Gemmell says Freid was always there for her, genuinely concerned about her well-being and going out of her way to shoulder her burdens.

"Debra even had her husband drive me to a medical examination hours away," Gemmell recalls. "She would call after surgeries or send me texts just to check in with me and make sure things were OK. She is a truly remarkable woman, so absolutely passionate about what she does."

Gemmell wasn't the only one who noted Freid's dedication and determination to get the justice that could bring back a life torn apart by injury.

"Debra keeps her client's interests in the forefront at all times," says Traverse City attorney Blake Ringsmuth, Freid's co-counsel on Gemmell's case. "Val was going through a very tough time in her life, and Debra was always there for her — after hours, responding to texts and calls at all times. She was very

compassionate, positive and affirming while still maintaining a very clear sense of boundaries and frank professionalism.”

Of course, commitment and compassion alone don’t win personal injury lawsuits. Ringsmuth recalls that Freid’s advocacy skills were as impressive as her belief in her client’s cause.

“Exceptionally smart, very articulate and focused, a phenomenal writer and leaves no stone unturned — that’s a killer combination for a plaintiff’s lawyer,” Ringsmuth says.

“The thing about Debra, in addition to her acumen, is that she has extremely high ethics with a conversely low level of ego. This gives her tremendous credibility that serves her clients well,” Ringsmuth adds.

## A Common Thread

A common thread runs through Freid’s current practice, which includes all types



Freid’s four children; from left: Ethan, Ashley, Dillon and Ian



Freid’s three grandchildren (from daughter Ashley) in Colorado

of employment discrimination cases as well as personal injury and wrongful death litigation. It’s a thread that can be followed all the way back to her father’s workers’ compensation practice, which she joined after graduating from Wayne State University Law School in 1981.

“Workers’ compensation claims and employment matters both come down to the same fundamental issue,” Freid says. “In both cases, someone wants to work and support their family but is being prevented from doing so; by physical injury in the former, and by the bad acts of their employer in the latter.”

A native of Southfield who now makes her home in Grand Blanc, Freid followed her dad when he moved his practice from Detroit to Saginaw in the early 1980s. She was still focused on workers’ compensation matters but felt she could do more to help people who found themselves unable to make a living through no fault of their own.

“I was working with folks on their compensation claims who would tell me about these other circumstances regarding their employment situation that were terribly unfair,” Freid recalls. “Many were also being injured in a broader sense by facing discrimination or termination simply for exercising their rights or standing up against a wrong.”

These stories had a visceral impact on her already strong inclination to fight for those facing tough situations, long odds or the unjust actions of companies who hold employees’ livelihoods in their hands.

“Employment law is an area where people often find themselves in the worst situations. You’re struggling to earn a living; you’re trying to support your family. But you have almost no power when your employer decides to take advantage of you or treat you unfairly and illegally,” Freid says. “I felt we were only doing part of the job with workers’ compensation, as important as that was.”

Freid says that employment law attorneys on the plaintiffs’ side were few and far between in the Saginaw area when she first started practicing, so she decided to fill that gap. Freid built a robust employment and personal injury practice in Saginaw, eventually forming her own firm in 1988 with workers’ compensation attorney Ed Gallagher, who had worked with Freid at her father’s firm. Matthew Taylor, a Social Security Disability lawyer, joined the firm a year later.

Ask Gallagher about his partner and friend of over 30 years and he will describe a lawyer who develops an encyclopedic knowledge of every aspect of a case, a thoroughness that often reveals new claims

to pursue or arguments to assert.

“Debra has an incredible capacity to go through a file and know everything. Nothing gets past her,” Gallagher says. “A client may come in talking about one issue, and Debra will go through things so methodically, patiently and thoroughly that she will find 10 other issues or facts that may bolster her clients’ position.”

Freid’s dad may have been the best cross-examiner she had ever seen, but Gallagher says much the same about her.

“She never gets moved off point. She is so attuned to what a witness says and how it does or doesn’t respond to her questions,” Gallagher says. “I watched her cross-examine a highly credentialed but extremely evasive expert witness for 50 minutes. Debra was relentless and eventually got him to give unequivocal yes or no answers that were key to her winning the case.”

## Commitment to Plaintiffs’ Bar

Freid thinks the key to being a successful plaintiffs’ lawyer is a passionate belief in what you do. She is particularly motivated (and incensed) by employment cases in which efforts to expose discrimination, harassment or misconduct are themselves the basis for further discrimination, harassment or misconduct.

“It is really hard when, say, a human resources person takes on the role of advocate for an employee alleging wrongful conduct only to then be subjected to retaliation themselves for doing so,” Freid says. “People shouldn’t be punished for having the personal courage to do the right thing. Righting that wrong is almost like a two-for-one.”

For those who didn’t grow up like she did with a father who could instill the passion she has for her work, Freid says such inspiration often comes from other experiences prior to or in law school — a clinic, professor or internship that exposes the individual to the rewards of representing the injured. Freid was fortunate to have that as part of her professional development as well.

“Barry Waldman is a highly esteemed and successful Detroit plaintiff’s lawyer who was extremely influential in my decision to pursue plaintiffs’ work,” Freid says. “He is a gifted advocate, but he also demonstrates the real heart of a plaintiffs’ lawyer. He is committed to giving every client the very best representation and obtaining the very best results. That gave me an idea of the kind of lawyer I wanted to be, to demonstrate the truth and seek justice.”

Freid says young lawyers need that kind of mentoring now more than ever.

“Frankly, if you don’t have that exposure it’s hard to imagine being a plaintiffs’ lawyer

today, given the draconian limitations on the rights of the injured that have transpired in the state over the last couple of decades,” Freid laments. “The changes in Michigan law have made it much harder to forge a successful career path in the plaintiffs’ bar. Hiring opportunities are more likely to be found in large defense firms,” she adds.

These challenges to the rights of Michigan injury victims are not going unanswered by Freid and her colleagues in the Michigan Association for Justice, a 1,400-member organization dedicated to the preservation of the rights of the injured and to vigorous and effective representation on their behalf. Currently, the group’s vice president, Freid assumes the office of president-elect in June 2017. Her decades of active involvement in the organization reflect the values she shares with her fellow plaintiffs’ lawyers and the belief she has in the power of collective action to help protect injury victims from legislative shortsightedness.

“The Michigan Association of Justice is doing absolutely critical work in the face of a concerted effort by the state legislature to restrict the rights of victims,” Freid says. “It is so important to have this joint effort which can explain to legislators that their

decisions affect the lives of real people, that putting these restrictions on the ability of victims to seek compensation and justice is not just a matter of pushing paper and crunching numbers.”

Freid is also actively involved in numerous other professional organizations, including the American Board of Trial Attorneys, the American Association for Justice, the National Employment Lawyers Association, the Saginaw County Bar Association and the Women’s Lawyer Association of Michigan. Board Certified as a Civil Trial Advocate by the National Board of Trial Advocacy, one of only nine attorneys in Michigan so recognized, Freid is a frequent volunteer at Saginaw *pro bono* clinics and serves as a volunteer judge at local college moot court competitions.

### **From Ballet to the Bar**

The mother of four adult children, Freid remembers many dinner table discussions about what she did for a living, why she believed it was so important, and how her job intersected with the larger political issues of the day. While her kids developed a deep respect for their mom and the help she has provided to countless people, they forged their own paths outside of the law.

Her oldest daughter Ashley owns a media marketing company in Steamboat Springs, Colorado; her son Ethan is an actor in Los Angeles; her son Ian is a budding writer; and her daughter Dillon currently attends Kalamazoo College.

When discussing her kids’ careers, Freid admits that the narrative of her always wanting to be a trial lawyer like her dad isn’t entirely accurate.

“I was fascinated by my dad’s work and the possibility of following the same path,” Freid says. “But I had visions of being a ballet dancer.”

That vision took her all the way to New York University, where she spent a semester studying dance before deciding that pursuing a legal career was a better idea than performing pirouettes. She came back to Michigan and attended Wayne State University before moving on to law school. It’s a choice she doesn’t for a moment regret.

“What I do as an advocate is such a big part of who I am as a person,” Freid says. “I really do believe that the work we do as plaintiffs’ lawyers is important, and making a positive difference in someone’s life when they are struggling or have been victimized is extremely rewarding.” ■