

Tommy Strow

Ethics Are Paramount to This LaSalle County Workers' Compensation and PI Lawyer

by Emily Donovan

OTTAWA — When the September 11 terrorist attacks hit, Thomas M. Strow was “flittering away” on a gap year in Los Angeles.

He had finished his undergraduate degree just four months earlier with majors in philosophy and religious studies. Really, he jokes, all that qualified him to do was be homeless.

One of his college textbooks was titled *The Great Conversation*. It framed human history as a battle of ideas progressing over time. The terrorist attacks made him search for how to more positively contribute to that conversation.

“Like a lot of people, I think that refocused me in terms of what I should do

with my life and how I should try to find some greater purpose to it,” he says.

Strow set out to do good.

“Trying to be a good lawyer is just a piece of the puzzle of trying to build a better human being,” he says.

Now, Strow practices workers' compensation and personal injury law in Ottawa at **Strow Law LLC**, a firm he co-founded with his wife Morgan Klein Strow. He says that while he hasn't brought about world peace, he knows he has made a difference in his clients' lives.

“The positive feedback you get from the clients is what really feeds the sense of a purpose and why you're doing this,” he says.

Actor, Philosophy Student Finds Law

To this day, Strow and his wife/legal partner debate all the time why he became a lawyer.

“I am not one of those people who knew they wanted to be a lawyer from the time they were little,” he says.

In high school, Strow told a teacher that he felt he had a choice: to play the role of somebody who changed the world or to be the person who tries to change the world.

He considered acting. He played Harold Hill in *The Music Man* in high school, and Morgan says he is still a bit of a local celebrity.

For one semester, Strow went to Boston University to study acting. However, when engaging in acting exercises like



lying on his back on the floor pretending to be an animal, he asked himself what he was really doing there.

“What, ultimately, does this serve myself or anybody else?” he asked.

Strow couldn’t settle on just playing the part of someone who makes positive change.

“To show where my mind had gone: I ended up getting a B+ in Script Analysis and an A- in Philosophy of Science,” Strow says.

It was during his semester as an acting student that Strow found his favorite philosopher. He needed to take one regular liberal arts class in addition to theatre classes like Script Analysis. An upperclassman flipped through the syllabus with him and they found that Philosophy of Science fit his schedule.

Though Strow says he didn’t understand what Karl Popper’s ideas really meant until much later, the course prominently featured his philosophy.

“He had intellectual humility,” Strow says. “He thought truth was a noble pursuit, but he understood that it wasn’t easy.”

Popper considered science an approximation of the truth through falsification. You can’t prove a theory like gravity true, but you can prove geocentrism false. Through gradual falsification, you get a closer and closer approximation of the truth.

“In one of his books, he says that truth is not manifest, and it is not easy to come by,” Strow says. “That is something that I live by so that I do stay humble and not think that I know everything.”

Strow left the acting program and graduated in 2001 from Anderson University in Indiana. He didn’t study religion and philosophy in college just because he found the subjects interesting. He wanted to figure out what he was supposed to be doing with his life.

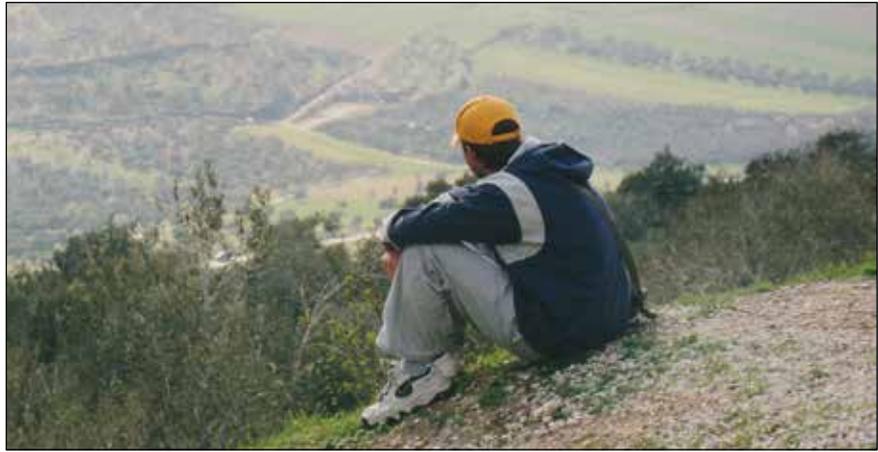
“To me, it was imperative that I came to some sensible answer before I died,” he says.

He had never even considered a legal career until he was interning for the Speaker of the House in Washington, D.C., during college. Strow mentioned he had enjoyed chatting with the people in the press box. A staff member said, “Well, if you like those kind of people, you should become a lawyer.”

He graduated from University of Illinois College of Law in 2005 and returned to his home town of Ottawa to work at the city’s biggest firm. He was determined to pay off his student debt as fast as possible, but he also happened to fall into liking the areas of workers’ compensation and personal injury law.

Strow never thought he would come back to Ottawa. His eyes had always been set on the horizon.

His dad was a construction union laborer, which gives Strow a great respect for the hard jobs his workers’ compensation clients do, and his mom was a teacher. He’s the



Strow looks over a valley in Israel during a semester abroad in Jerusalem



From left: Former First Lady Rosalynn Carter, Strow and Kane Farabaugh of Voice of America meet in Plains, Georgia, during a recent trip to the Carter Center in Atlanta



From left: son Atley, daughter Annaliese, wife Morgan Strow, Strow and son Sebastian.

youngest of four siblings and the only one to return to Ottawa.

Now that he's older, however, Ottawa is where he wants to be. He says the grass isn't always greener on the other side.

No matter where you go, Strow says, you're always in somebody's hometown. He says he could move to any random city and arrive to find out there's some kid who feels like they've achieved nothing if they never left.

As much as he likes visiting Chicago, Strow loves Ottawa's open skies where you can see the stars at night and remember the bigger picture.

Plus, he likes how laid back the community is. In Ottawa, he can walk right into the courthouse. The security guards get to know the attorneys there, and so they stopped checking him.

"Happy is not off someplace else," Strow says. "Happiness has to be something you can find in your present circumstances, in your present environment, or you're never going to find it."

Making a Home

Strow was one of the attorneys who interviewed Morgan when she applied to the firm where he was working at the time.

"When I was asking her if she could stay in a place like Ottawa, I didn't realize I was seriously asking that question of a potential spouse," Tommy jokes.

He says some attorneys not from Ottawa sometimes look at it as a stopping place on their journey to Chicago. Some attorneys feel Chicago is a Mecca, he says, and they only have achieved something if they work there.

"Honestly, I expected to live here for about a year, get some work experience, and then go back to the city," Morgan says.

She also grew up in a small town. When she was asked if she could see herself in Ottawa, she guessed she could.

"I've proven that to be true," Morgan laughs.

Morgan shadowed Tommy during training, taking long drives together for cases in Springfield and all over the state. She says he was easy to talk to — genuine, reflective, professional and funny — and they connected.

"When you're in the car for long periods of time, you have nothing to do but talk to the person next to you," she says.

While Morgan was attracted to Tommy, she was reluctant to start a relationship, afraid she could lose her job. She had just graduated from the University of Illinois College of Law, and it had taken her a long time to land the position. She didn't want to jeopardize anything.

Tommy, ever upfront and honest, asked for her permission to ask their boss if they

could date.

"He was respectful of our employer as well," she says. "And of course it's easier just to have things in the light of day rather than be secretive."

Morgan and Tommy got engaged on Dec. 10, 2010, only 39 days after Morgan's first day on the job. They married on Feb. 4, 2011, and the first of their three kids was born July 1, 2012.

Morgan says it was fast, but it all just felt right.

"He's probably one of the kindest people I have ever met," she says. "And he certainly proved that as my husband."

Tommy is careful with his words, Morgan says. Sometimes when they're on the phone, she'll ask him a question. He'll take a long enough moment to think before responding that she wonders if he's hung up. She's learning to wait and not say "Hello?"

"He thinks about the consequences of his words," Morgan says. "That reflection helps him then, if it's in the practice of law, understand where they're coming from and be able to use that to a strategic advantage."

Morgan says Tommy is a great dad, too. He plays the trumpet and practices piano with the kids. They play games like Zingo together, and he reads to them.

First came Sebastian, who is now 4. Then Atley, 3, and finally Annaliese, 1. When they were expecting their third child, they decided to open their own firm.

"How can I tell my kids that they need to reach for the stars or pursue their dreams or take risks if I am not willing to do the same?" Tommy asks.

Strow Law opened on July 15, 2015. Thirteen days later Annaliese was born.

Tommy says there's no question it was the right decision. Tommy focuses on workers' compensation and personal injury, and Morgan focuses on personal injury, workers' compensation, family law and bankruptcy. They have "wonderful clients," he says, and can schedule work around tucking the kids into bed or taking them to last-minute doctor's appointments.

"We've never been happier, more successful," he says.

Winning for the Right Reasons

While Strow Law has won some large recoveries, Strow says being a good lawyer is about more than winning a certain dollar amount.

"It's usually winning a matter of principle that I feel best about — feeling like you're winning for the right reasons," he says.

Strow says he doesn't get aggressive for the sake of getting aggressive. Still, he can play the tough guy role for clients if it's what they need.

"Everybody wants a fighter," he says.

In fact, that's the mantra Strow Law advertises on a billboard and online: "Don't just fight. Fight to win."

"A lot of people injured at work or injured in an accident do want somebody who is willing to go bloody a few noses," he says.

And yet neither Tommy nor Morgan believe hostility is the best way to achieve what the client actually wants.

"We do see a case more as a chess match, trying to outsmart your opponent and marshal the facts, rather than use pure blunt force," he says.

The two lawyers figure out and stay focused on what their clients really want.

"You don't do that by being obnoxious — you actually have to work through things," he says. "People want the bull, but my analogy is that the bull in the china shop destroys everything."

Strow doesn't like the hostile gamesmanship some other attorneys may employ. If the opposing counsel asks him for something, he doesn't pretend it doesn't exist. He says he doesn't need to push any ethical boundaries or exploit the legal system to be an effective counsel.

"I don't like the bullies in the profession because what I've found is they're often not the best attorneys, and they mask their lack of education about the actual law just by (their) use of personality," he says.

Strow compares his legal style to a cheetah. A cheetah stalks its prey patiently, but also can run fast and pounce when necessary.

Pouncing when necessary is especially important in workers' compensation and in personal injury law, he says. The insurance adjuster, the defendant company's owners and the opposing counsel all go home with a paycheck regardless of how the trial turns out or how long it takes.

"The only person that is not sure what is going to happen is the client, and if their representative does not impose a sense of urgency, nobody is going to care," he says.

Strow considers it his job to get a judge or jury to understand what his clients are going through.

"Nobody can ever feel the same pain and frustration about their situation that those people can," he says. "I don't necessarily think it's my job to feel that way; it's my job to make somebody else feel that way."

Mike Sorak, a 73-year-old engineer from Normal, tore cartilage in his knee at work a few years ago. He wrote up an incident report. Several colleagues witnessed the accident. Still, he says, his employer was stonewalling him and telling him to take aspirin.

Sorak got Strow involved. All of a sudden, his employer had him getting an MRI scan and seeing doctors.

"I can't say enough about the man," Sorak says, referring to his lawyer. "He's just a decent

person. He's very, very nice and his knowledge of the law seems to be exceptional."

Sorak returned to Strow when, Sorak says, another former employer was trying to cheat his wife out of benefits. The company was denying her medical stipend, claiming she hadn't sent in her yearly physical. She had, and Sorak had kept the fax confirmation numbers and the mailing proof of receipt. Strow took it from there. Sorak's wife got her health benefits back, and Sorak got an apology.

"It's amazing how agreeable (that company) gets when an attorney is involved," Sorak says.

Sorak says he's been amazed by Strow's efficiency.

"He's been nothing but excellent for me, and I think people are scared of him," Sorak says. "He's well-liked from what I can tell, and people become nervous."

Brad A. Elward, a partner at Heyl Royster Voelker & Allen PC, says everyone he knows holds Strow in high regard. They've become friends over the past seven years of trying workers' compensation appeals against each other. Elward says you can always count on Strow to be thorough and prepared.

"Thomas is one of the very, very few people I've seen on either side of the legal fence who will walk up to the podium with nothing," Elward says, "and he will argue a case based on his knowledge of it."

Elward was curious enough to look up a video of Strow arguing an Illinois Supreme Court case a few years back. Strow knew the case so thoroughly that he didn't need any notes whatsoever.

"It was very impressive to watch," Elward says. "He had a deep understanding of the case, and it was just typical Thomas."

Elward respects Strow's ability to step back from his arguments to talk about their different perspectives on the legal issues and his ability to think outside the box. And Elward says Strow's word is "gold."

"If he says, 'I'll give you this' or 'I'll do that,' that's absolutely going to happen," Elward says. "It's very valuable as opposing counsel to know that you've got someone who's got that kind of respect for the system."

Elward says he prefers competent and aggressive opponents like Strow.

"You've got to be on your A game when you work against him." ■