

The Beginning

I T WAS 1982, AND CHICAGO-KENT COLLEGE OF LAW Professor Warren D. Wolfson, a former judge, was sharing his desired roster for the school's first trial advocacy team with former Chicago-Kent Dean Lewis M. Collens.

Carla Lombardo '83 and John Hedblom '83 were obvious choices, and Collens was pleased.

The third choice was H. Patrick Morris '83.

"I'm not sure he'll graduate," the dean remarked, incredulous.

"That's OK," Wolfson responded. "I see something in him."

At least, that's the story as Morris heard it.

"This was the beginning of my string of straight As," he says. "I had never had straight As before, and I got straight As in trial ad."

That first trial advocacy team made it as far as the quarterfinals of the American Bar Association National Trial Advocacy Competition that was held in Houston. According to an [old April 4, 1983, edition](#) of *The Record*, the team came in third, falling short of Boston College by only two points.

But Morris didn't get used to losing.

After graduating, he joined the team at Johnson and Bell, where he hit the ground running. The firm's long-time leader and namesake, William "Bill" Johnson, took Morris under his wing.

"I was lucky that when I started, Bill was at the peak of a very illustrious career. I was the young lawyer working those cases up," he says. "Clients didn't come to Bill to settle cases. They came to him when the biggest cases couldn't settle and they had to be tried."

Johnson was up against ace attorney and media darling Phillip "Phil" Corboy.

"Phil Corboy was the best-prepared lawyer that I've ever seen, even to this day," says Morris. "When Phil would turn like a shark on you or one of your witnesses and just eviscerate them, you had to find some way to stand up without your knees buckling and respond to it. I watched Bill do it just so calmly, so effortlessly."

"As a young lawyer, it indelibly changes you," he continues.

Morris then assisted Johnson on a case that grabbed headlines across the country. He was helping Johnson defend a wire and cable manufacturer accused of fault in the Beverly Hills Supper Club Fire that killed 165 people in Southgate, Kentucky in 1977.

The duo won a not guilty verdict from the jury.

"I learned how to handle intense pressure, intense sympathy, but I learned that if you have a good case and you don't get distracted and you don't get nervous, you can still win," Morris says.

That set the groundwork for Morris' continued work in mass torts, which he still does at Johnson and Bell, some 40 years later.

"It's medical device companies like Medline and Johnson & Johnson. It's oil companies like ExxonMobil," he says. "I've been really fortunate to have the confidence of those kinds of clients who have all kinds of access to lawyers. They can pick the best and brightest lawyers in the country, but when they need cases tried, they turn to me."

He also handles a lot of First Amendment and media cases, representing figures from the *Chicago Tribune* to Dallas Cowboy running back Emmitt Smith.

"Nancy Hamilton was my first-year classmate and friend," he says. "She and her partner, Charles 'Chip' Babcock, of Jackson Walker based in Houston, were defending two of the reporters from the *Chicago Tribune* in a defamation case and needed someone who

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knew the Cook County Courthouse."

The case centered on the *Tribune's* reporting of the wrongful prosecutions of two men for the murder of Jeanine Nicarico. Morris and his team won a [not guilty verdict](#). The contested story went on to win a Pulitzer Prize.

His success led to other high-profile clients, including TV personality Dr. Phil, who was accused of creating a hostile work environment. Morris had to defend his client to the [media](#).

Morris wasn't worried. He's never cowered from uncomfortable assignments. He received one early in his career when he was a board member at the [Defense Research Institute](#) (DRI), an organization of defense attorneys, that changed not just his career trajectory, but his life.

"Sheryl Willert was the first African American president of the DRI. She had this image of me as a frat boy-type," he remembers. "She said she was going to do me the biggest favor anyone ever has done for me. 'I'm going to make you chair of the National Diversity Committee', which didn't exist yet."

He was tasked with founding the committee, defining the group's mission, and creating instructional seminars. The committee still exists today and uses many of the frameworks that Morris originally established.

He says Willert kept her promise—it was the biggest favor he's ever received.

"It gave me so much experience that I would not have otherwise



had. I thank her all the time,” he says. “It resonated with me. Being an Irish Catholic lawyer in the city of Chicago, I’m certainly not a minority. But I knew the stories from my relatives. The ‘Irish Need Not Apply’ stuff is true.”

Morris realized that he needed to convince leadership at top firms to buy into the concept, or he wouldn’t get anything done. He sat down with the leaders of the 60 biggest firms in the DRI, laid out his diversity plan, and why they should follow it.

“I got a buy-in from almost all of them. Some of them were hardcore southern firms too. This was the late ’80s and early ’90s. It’s not like [how] we look at things today,” he says. “I think in some respects, they would listen to me because I was a white male.”

He adds, “I’m very happy about where we started and what we did. I’m still somewhat disappointed on the lack of progress that we’ve made on so many fronts.”

Morris has learned a lot about diversity working with his wife, a fellow trial lawyer.

“I could see jurors relating to her in a way that they weren’t relating to me. When you talk to them afterward with her there, you get insights that you don’t get when you’re just sitting there as a white male,” he says.

“He’s a student of human nature and that’s a critical element of being a good lawyer and a trial lawyer especially,” adds David Fanning ’01, shareholder at Johnson and Bell

Fanning has worked closely with Morris for the last 20 years.

Fanning sees Morris as a mentor.

“He’s always respected the individuality of everybody on the team, me included, and he has been a champion for all of the people that he’s worked for,” says Fanning.

For Morris, it all goes back to those first successes on the Chicago-Kent trial advocacy team.

“Warren was without exaggeration the finest cross-examiner in the country. There’s a methodology, and he drilled it into us,” says Morris. “He was with us every single day, seven days a week, just teaching us everything you can imagine from little ministerial things to how to stand, to whether to use a podium, to how to use notes, to things that I still use today.”

Former Judge David Erickson, who now leads Chicago-Kent’s Trial Advocacy Program, was also there in the early days.

“He made us believe in ourselves and he just cared so much about us,” says Morris. “He just really made you want to be better. Sometimes when you would do something and see his look of disappointment. It was almost worse than anything he could tell you.”

Inspired by his favorite Chicago-Kent instructors, Morris has returned to teach on an adjunct basis at Chicago-Kent and coaches the trial advocacy teams whenever he can.

“We just hired a fantastic lawyer who’s from Kent’s trial team, Danielle Austriaco ’21,” he says. “One of my partners said once, ‘We can’t just hire everyone off the Kent trial team.’ I said, ‘Why not?’”