



'We got them justice' Lisle-born attorney takes fights for the little guy

Author(s): Marni Pyke Daily Herald Staff Writer

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Shawn **Collins'** voice mails usually are brisk and to the point, cramming a lot of information into a few seconds.

But a Dec. 9 message was less focused than normal. The reason soon becomes apparent.

"Yesterday I had an emergency appendectomy," a somewhat groggy voice says.

"I'm at Edward Hospital convalescing. ...I'm supposed to be out in the next day or two. You can call me here; I'm doing a lot of work by phone."

Mixing surgery with business isn't out of the norm for **Collins**, an attorney who crams his passion for work, family and justice into what seems like a 26-hour day.

The Lisle native had a groundbreaking 2003 and, for his efforts on behalf of area residents, the Daily Herald has selected him Lisle's Person of the Year. **Collins** settled two lawsuits for \$18.5 million against an area manufacturer accused of polluting the aquifer with a dangerous chemical.

And the founder of The **Collins** Law Firm also began litigating a case on behalf of a downstate village where arsenic is tainting the soil and water.

It was quite a switch for the 46-year-old who started as a corporate lawyer, representing Fortune 500 companies.

But when it was discovered that trichloroethylene was coming from the **Lockformer** Co. site in Lisle and contaminating private wells in the town where **Collins** grew up, he embarked on a lawsuit that changed his career and turned him into an environmental crusader.

It's a riskier, unpredictable and time-consuming line of work. But **Collins** says he's never been happier.

"If a couple of businesses are fighting over money, no one's health is threatened," he says.
"Nobody's up at night worrying about their children and if they'll be OK."

"But when you deal with these contamination cases and get to know these families, you really internalize their fears and anxieties. That makes for a more stressful environment. Ultimately, you hope it makes for a more meaningful working life and it makes me a better contributor to society."

Born in a small town

Collins lives in south Naperville with his wife, Meg, and three young daughters.

But his roots are in the smaller burg of Lisle, where his grandfather ran a local newspaper.

Collins spent his early years in a house near downtown with six sisters and brothers. He attended kindergarten in the building that, until recently, served as village hall.

During a recent visit to Main Street, **Collins** listed the landmarks of his childhood. The Book Nook where he bought cream sodas and Suzy Qs. The Lisle-Woodridge Fire District's Station 1, which used to be a popular playground.

"Typically, I'd get home from school and have dinner as fast as I could. Then I and my friends would go play baseball and basketball, depending on the season," he recalls.

"It was a great community to grow up in. The police would stop and talk to us, sometimes they'd come out and play. You didn't hear about people locking their doors."

Naperville resident Mary Ann Bobosky remembers **Collins** as a child who played with her brother Bobby at the family's farmhouse on Route 53 in Lisle.

"He was serious and focused," she recalled.

Collins attended St. Joan of Arc School, which he describes as "a warm cocoon of learning."

"St. Joan was the best school I've ever been to," says **Collins**, who went on to graduate from Lisle High School and then obtained his bachelor's degree from Notre Dame and his law degree from the University of Chicago.

"(St. Joan) was a place where the teachers cared about me as a person," **Collins** said. "I really felt that. They really went out of their way to help me learn."

Of course that didn't mean there wasn't the occasional need for discipline.

"I threw too many snowballs, so I was sent home for lunch on several occasions," **Collins** says. "I had more chats with Sister Carolyn than my parents wanted me to then."

St. Joan Principal Sister Carolyn Sieg has forgiven **Collins** for any former transgressions. The school recently honored him for his work in the **Lockformer** case by presenting him with a distinguished graduate award.

"It's for a student who exemplifies the values of St. Joan's and carries those out as an adult," Sieg says.

A call to action

As a boy, **Collins** thought about **Lockformer** Co. only as it concerned his lawn-mowing business.

"**Lockformer** had the biggest lawn in all of Lisle," he says. "My original thoughts about **Lockformer** were that I wanted to cut their lawn."

The company re-entered his adult world when rumors started flying in the late summer of 2000 that Lisle wells were tainted with trichloroethylene, or TCE.

Acting on behalf of some local families, **Collins'** firm paid for tests of people's water.

"I felt like I was in these families' nightmares," he says. "I very frequently was first to tell them their water was contaminated. It's a horrible thing to tell someone; it's almost like being a doctor and telling someone they have a bad test result."

Collins was the first to sue **Lockformer** on behalf of 186 families living near the manufacturer. The lawsuit included **Lockformer's** two parent companies and the supplier that delivered TCE to the plant, now owned by Honeywell International Inc.

Later, the Illinois attorney general's office and the state and federal Environmental Protection Agencies launched their own investigations.

Authorities concluded TCE from the **Lockformer** property had entered the aquifer.

But despite the official findings, **Collins** still faced an uphill legal battle. His firm went into debt to take the first **Lockformer** case to court, but that didn't deter the lawyers working on the case.

"More than anything else, I want to give my clients their day in court in front of a jury. That's where the playing field gets even," **Collins** says.

Two weeks into the May 2002 trial, the companies settled for \$10 million.

Attorney Norm Berger, who works with **Collins**, says his friend thrives on fighting "for the little guy."

"He's really motivated to serve people without representation," Berger says.

Scales of justice

Last year was another busy one for **Collins**. He settled a second lawsuit against **Lockformer** that involved 1,500 families living south of the plant for \$12.5 million.

He also settled a suit for \$6 million filed on behalf of Anne Schreiber, a doctor who grew up in Lisle near **Lockformer**. Schreiber contracted non-Hodgkin's lymphoma as a result of drinking water tainted with TCE, the lawsuit charged.

In addition, **Collins** struck a deal with Honeywell International Inc. to pay an additional \$3.6 million in the two cases.

All told, **Collins** has won more than \$32 million for residents and families from the three contamination suits he filed against **Lockformer** in the last two years.

Donna Schreiber, Anne's mother, first met **Collins** at the Lisle Library during a meeting for people with polluted wells.

"He's very warm and down-to-earth," Schreiber says. "He's a shirt-sleeve person. I always thought

a lawyer would be wearing suits."

Adds Bobosky, "He's low-key in a lot of ways, which is a dichotomy when you're talking about trial lawyers.

And then there's **Collins'** work ethic.

That appendectomy in early December didn't stop him from conducting business from his hospital bed.

"I got a call from Shawn within 15 minutes of (him) being released from the recovery room," Berger says. "He wanted to talk about our cases. Shawn has one speed and it's full."

That energy has led to The **Collins** Law Firm creating some legal firsts in Illinois.

"The **Lockformer** cases were the very first ones in this federal jurisdiction where the court looked at groundwater contamination as a legal issue," **Collins** says. "That had been the exclusive province of the West Coast states."

The latest challenge for the firm is a case in Naplate, a downstate industrial town. A glass manufacturer dumped huge amounts of arsenic into the water for years, **Collins** charges in a federal lawsuit.

Despite his past successes, nothing is a sure thing.

"Almost always we're told we're not going to be able to stay in the case financially," **Collins** says.

But he can't stop fighting for his clients.

"What I feel we really accomplished for them was we got them justice from these companies," he says, referring to the **Lockformer** cases.

"We let them know this is still a country where if they fight back, they can get justice."

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