

Florida defense attorney takes measured approach to his work

By Brian Cox

Defense attorney Justin Saar is never tempted to rise to the bait. Regardless of any “shenanigans” a plaintiff’s attorney may pull in order to rattle his cage and gain an advantage, Saar prefers to remain in calm waters.

“I don’t get excited,” he says. “There’s no reason to get frenzied about cases. I treat it like a marathon, slow and steady.”

The measured approach has served him well in his 13-year career and allowed him to establish a reputation as a straight shooter.

“If I say something, I mean it,” he says. “I try to be honest with opposing counsel so that when I draw a line in the sand, they know I stand by my word.”

An equity partner at Ogden Sullivan Stover & Saar, P.A. in Tampa, Fla., Saar employs his composed demeanor to distill cases to their essence, from where he says they can be resolved.

It also helps that he is conscientious about maintaining good relationships whenever possible with attorneys on the other side of the bar.

“It’s always been easy for me to make friends,” he says. “I enjoy people. I enjoy talking with people. Even when I’m dealing with a difficult plaintiff’s attorney, after they get done pounding



Attorney Justin Saar and his wife, Sara, enjoy a trip to Cocoa Beach, Fla., with their two sons, Preston, 2, and Henry, 4.



their chest, I ask about their family or if they have any weekend plans to cut through the tension.”

Saar describes himself as “close to a Tampanian as they come,” but he was born in Germany where his father was stationed as an F-16 pilot with the U.S. Air Force. When Saar was 2, his father was transferred to MacDill Air Force Base in Tampa. Saar – and much of his family – has been there ever since. He touts the city’s beaches and state parks. He compares the Gulf Coast city to Goldilocks’ choice of a bed: “Not too big and not too small.”

Despite having lived the majority of his life in Tampa, Saar has traveled extensively. His father became a pilot for American Airlines and the family took many trips with his father as a pilot and a travel companion.

“We could just pick up and go,” says Saar. “I traveled a lot of the world growing up.”

He has a map of the world hanging in his office with pins marking where he’s visited. It sits just over his head in Zoom hearings and mediations. He’s been to every state except Alaska. Europe, in particular, is heavily dotted. Throughout college, Saar worked as a plumber over the summer, saving his money for backpacking trips all over Europe with friends and family during spring and summer breaks. His ideal vacation is to spend a week in a new city with his family exploring its museums, restaurants, parks, and architecture.

“I love the differences in each region I go to and learning about the different cultures,” he says. “We’re not going to be on this Earth that long. We may as well enjoy it and get out to see what else is out there.”

He says his traveling experiences have helped him identify what he can control and what he can’t control – in life and as a lawyer.

“I don’t control the facts of the case,” he says. “I don’t control what a witness is going to say.”

Saar decided to become a lawyer after first considering being a dentist. He’d been pretty good at chemistry in high school,

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but at the University of Florida he discovered math and science were not his strengths. He switched his major from chemistry to political science. After graduating in 2006, he enrolled at Stetson University College of Law in Gulfport.

When he came out of law school in 2009 in the midst of the Great Recession, it was a difficult job market for lawyers. For a time, he was interested in practicing international law, but that would likely require him to move to New York or Washington, D.C. or possibly overseas, and he preferred to stay in Florida.

"I'm very close with my family," he says. "Being able to raise my family near their grandparents and cousins has always been important."

Saar accepted a law clerk position with the Fourth Judicial Circuit Court in Jacksonville where he largely handled evidentiary issues for the judges, occasionally having the opportunity to wear the robe as a general magistrate.

Two years later, he returned to Tampa to enter private practice, joining a large insurance defense firm where he gained valuable trial and mediation experience working primarily on cases involving premises liability and trucking accidents. The defense work aligned nicely with his nature and skill set.

"I fell into it because I was good at it," says Saar, who was at the firm for seven years, making partner and garnering the attention of Tim Sullivan, who had founded his own firm in 1990 and was on the lookout for fresh talent.

Saar, who had gone to high school with Sullivan's son, frequently ran into the veteran attorney at a local Starbucks on Saturday mornings before heading into the office. The two took to chatting, and the informal talks eventually led to Sullivan suggesting Saar join his firm.



Justin and his 2-year-old son Preston in downtown Tampa, Fla.



Justin enjoys traveling with his family to Jekyll Island in northern Georgia and cycling with his sons, Henry and Preston.

Aware of Sullivan's standing in the legal community as a man of his word, Saar was convinced to make the leap and five years later is now the firm's co-managing partner, teaming up with colleague Heather Stover to lead and grow the firm. He is committed to maintaining the firm's reputation for being friendly, cordial, and respectful.

"We want to have good relationships with our clients, with the judges we deal with, and with opposing counsel," he says. "It's a profession and we stress that means professional. We want to have that reputation of being a professional firm."

The firm is currently considering bringing on more attorneys who have experience in defending trucking or premises cases.

"I think the thing we look for the most is strong research and writing skills," says Saar. "That's the foundation of what being a lawyer is. Providing clear analysis of what the issues are and boiling down the noise in order to tell a judge or a jury what's important in the case."

Saar says technology is introducing new aspects to defending liability cases. Many of his transportation clients now utilize extensive technology in their vehicles that can provide an enormous amount of data, which allows companies to better identify good drivers from bad.

"So, when I have a catastrophic accident, I usually have a driver with a pretty clean record," says Saar. "The data tells me usually that there's no speeding. Dash cams take out a lot of question marks that in the past might have been present from multiple and conflicting versions of the incident."

He says fewer questions about what actually occurred make it easier to decide whether it's a case to settle or a case to fight and take to trial.

Technology is influencing the nature of premises liability cases, as well. More clients now provide better training and

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document it better, says Saar, which leads to better trained employees and fewer accidents on the property. He sees a time when more restaurants will be “ghost kitchens” – designed to serve customers exclusively by delivery and pick up – and so will have fewer patrons to slip and fall in the dining room because there will be no dining room.

“There are technologies out there that are changing the way things are done,” he says. “American ingenuity is not going to make the worker obsolete; it’s going to supplement the worker.”

Saar sits on the Executive Committee for the Primerus™ Premises Liability practice group and appreciates the interchange with attorneys across the country. Primerus™ allows the eight-person, one-office law firm to maintain quality control, he says. It also affords the opportunity to discuss with similarly sized firms from coast-to-coast best practices and effective strategies for keeping valued attorneys and staff from seeking opportunities elsewhere, according to Saar.

Saar met his wife, Sara, while he was law clerking. She was a pediatric nurse from Florida’s Panhandle who also came from a military family. The couple has two sons that Saar describes as “wild and rambunctious.” Henry is 4 and Preston is 2. The family enjoys hiking in nearby parks, watching the Tampa Bay Lightning, and taking advantage of the Florida sunshine

“With all the bumps and bruises my boys get and all of the sicknesses they bring home from playing with their friends, it’s good to have a pediatric nurse who’s able to say ‘this is nothing’ versus ‘better take him to urgent care,’” jokes Saar.

When he has time, Saar enjoys cooking a big family meal on Sunday nights, trying fancy and involved recipes found in his Julia Childs’ cookbook, as well as family recipes. He particularly enjoys preparing dishes from around the world, maybe something from Tuscany or Mexico. Cooking is a way to unwind, he says.



Justin and his son Henry hike in Blue Ridge, Ga.

“At the end of the night, you’ve got this savory meal that’s sort of your reward for the whole week and to help you gear up for Monday,” he says.

Nevertheless, Saar concedes that, for right now at least, his kids strongly prefer chicken tenders and French fries.



Justin and his wife, Sara, enjoy trips to Gulf Breeze, Fla.