

A sage piece of fatherly advice served med-mal attorney well

By Brian Cox

When Brian McKeen was a youngster growing up in a Detroit suburb, his father told him, "I don't care what you do, but whatever you decide to do, be the best at it."

And for the past four decades that is exactly what McKeen has tried to do as a plaintiff's lawyer. Having secured many of the top jury verdicts in state history, he is considered one of the foremost medical malpractice attorneys in the Midwest.

"I'll leave it to other people to say whether I'm the best or not the best, but I certainly strive to be the best," says McKeen, managing partner at McKeen & Associates, P.C. in Detroit.

It has been said that great trial lawyers are born, not made, but McKeen prefers to think there's the potential for someone not destined to be a great trial lawyer to become one. He believes anyone who really cares to become an effective plaintiff advocate can acquire the necessary skills. But it takes work.

And working to be the best requires a tremendous amount of time, passion, and energy, which McKeen has been bringing to his practice for decades. He has been at the top of his game in the plaintiff's bar in Michigan since not long after he started practicing in 1983.



Brian McKeen (center) is a member of the Inner Circle of Advocates, an invitation-only group of the best plaintiff lawyers in the United States. With more than two dozen attorneys, McKeen & Associates handles medical malpractice and personal injury cases throughout Michigan and across the country.



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McKeen & Associates was proud to be a supporting sponsor of the 2025 Mott Golf Classic, an inspiring event benefiting University of Michigan Health C.S. Mott Children's Hospital. Taking part in the tournament were McKeen & Associates attorneys (l-r) Leon Walsh, Kenneth Lee, and Brian McKeen with Chuck Edwards.

"You can't rest on your laurels," he says. "Nobody cares what you did for your last client. All any client cares about is what are you going to do for them? What are you going to do in your next trial? You have to back up your reputation with the next case and the next case and the next case after that... the road goes on forever."

In 2009, McKeen was inducted into the Inner Circle of Advocates, an invitation-only group of the best plaintiff lawyers in the United States. Members must have at least three verdicts in excess of \$1 million or two verdicts in excess of \$1 million with one of them equal to or more than \$10 million. Membership is limited to 100 of the country's best plaintiff lawyers.

"I dreamed of someday being in it," he says.

McKeen was born and raised in the suburbs of Detroit and still lives in suburban Bloomfield Hills, not far from where his sense of drive was first instilled. His father worked for Cadillac Motor Co.; his mother was a nurse and a graduate of Henry Ford Hospital Nursing. A good and competitive athlete, McKeen played soccer and ice hockey and competed in track as a pole vaulter.

That competitive instinct never faded. Instead, it found a different outlet.

McKeen attended Central Michigan University, where he first seriously considered law school as a freshman. He joined the pre-law club, worked with a pre-law advisor, and had an early experience that left a lasting impression. He was selected to pick up Wade McCree Jr., then Solicitor General of the United States, from the airport and accompany him to dinner before a campus

speaking engagement. The time was brief, but the impact was not. McCree's poise, dignity, and presence stayed with McKeen.

"There was so much to like about him and emulate in him," McKeen says. "He was kind of a big influence, although I only spent a little bit of time with him."

McKeen went on to attend Cooley Law School in Lansing, Mich., still uncertain about exactly what he wanted to do. At various points, he considered politics and real estate. He wasn't even sure he truly wanted to be a lawyer but believed a law degree would be of value whatever career path he chose. What changed that uncertainty was exposure. While clerking for judges in Oakland County, McKeen began watching trials – real trials, with real consequences – and something clicked.

"It was exciting," he says. "The subject matter was interesting. It was never the same pattern twice, so it would never get boring. There's a lot of real-life drama."

He saw cases that were high risk and high reward, and he watched lawyers who were excellent and lawyers who were not.

He thought, "Wow, I can do this."

He graduated from law school in January 1982 and clerked for Judge Dorothy Comstock Riley, an experience that shaped both his professional standards and his sense of character. Riley, he recalls, was a petite woman with a spine "strong as steel." Early in her career, she had struggled to find work as a lawyer, starting instead in a stenography pool before working her way up, eventually becoming the first woman to serve on the Michigan Court of Appeals before being appointed to the Michigan Supreme Court. From her, McKeen learned persistence, professionalism, and the power of quiet authority.

"She was a very gracious woman," he says. "Had a very pleasant demeanor and could disagree with people without being disagreeable."

He also clerked for Judge Robert Anderson on the Oakland County Circuit Court. Being surrounded by judges who had achieved so much was deeply motivating. Watching them reinforced what McKeen was beginning to understand: excellence in law was not accidental. It was built, deliberately, over time.

While still in law school, McKeen interned with the Prosecuting Attorneys Association of Michigan. After a brief training session at the state police headquarters, he was sent to Bad Axe, Mich., in Huron County, where he was quickly put to work. On the Monday of his second week, he tried a felony jury trial in circuit court. He also handled smaller cases in district court and did work in probate court. The immediacy of courtroom responsibility was empowering.

"It is exciting to go for a result that you believe is just and to get that result," he says. "And it feels good."

For a time, he considered becoming a prosecuting attorney. Ultimately, a piece of advice redirected him.

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"I was advised that the best way to become a plaintiff lawyer was to be a plaintiff lawyer and do the work," he says. "That was some pretty fundamental advice that turned out to be absolutely spot on."

In 1983, McKeen began practicing law with Tom Blakely, who had recently split from Charfoos & Christensen, P.C. to start his own practice. The connection came through a network of mentors, including Justice Riley and Paul Rosen, a constitutional lawyer with Goodman, Eden, Millender, & Bedrosian. Rosen took the time to talk with McKeen, a young lawyer he barely knew, counseling him about career opportunities and encouraging his interest in medical malpractice.

"It's important to note that a guy like Paul Rosen, who was an excellent lawyer, took time to mentor a young lawyer he didn't know, just to help someone," McKeen says. "It's so important that lawyers do that."

Medical malpractice appealed to McKeen almost immediately. Watching those trials, he was drawn to the challenge of confronting expert witnesses, cutting through what he viewed as excuses, and proving to a jury that an injury or death was preventable. That experience forged his passion for seeking justice on behalf of people and families whose lives had been destroyed by acts of negligence. The experience also taught him the importance of thorough research.

"You have to take a deep dive into the medical issues, medical literature, and medical records," he explains. In his view, most cases ultimately turn not on abstract legal theory but on concrete facts: whether the standard of care was violated and whether that violation caused harm.

"I spend very little time researching the law," he says, relying on his able research staff instead. "I spend most of my time investigating medical legal situations and proving that death and injury was avoidable."

Blakely gave McKeen significant responsibility early on. After watching his mentor try a case or two, McKeen was handed files and told to "go have at it." Many cases were resolved on the courthouse steps, but when one finally went to trial, McKeen felt ready. From the outset, he was willing to go to court when it served his clients' interests.

"I was always ready, willing, and able to go into court. If I thought it suited our clients' best interests, we didn't back down from a challenge," he says. "We came out on top almost invariably."

That reputation mattered. McKeen believes the defense bar and insurance industry quickly learn which lawyers will actually try cases and which will not.

"There are a lot of people who call themselves trial lawyers who don't want to go to court," he says. "And the defense bar knows who those people are."

Without a demonstrated ability to obtain verdicts, he says, lawyers effectively impose a glass ceiling on themselves and, by extension, on their clients' recoveries.

Success, in his view, is inseparable from preparation. Another piece of advice has stayed with him since his twenties. At a friend's wedding, he asked a successful lawyer about the secret to success. The answer was blunt.

"Work your ass off," McKeen recalls. "There is unfortunately no substitute for that."

For McKeen, that work means mastering medical records, understanding available treatment options, identifying how outcomes could have been avoided, and dismantling defense expert testimony through exhaustive preparation. It means knowing the literature, reviewing curricula vitae, and uncovering prior inconsistent statements.

"That all sounds pretty simple," he says, "but the art is in how to go about doing that."

Blakely retired around 1995, after roughly 12 years together, and McKeen continued to build his practice, eventually leading the firm that now includes 25 lawyers and handles cases throughout Michigan and across the country. In 2009, his long-held goal of Inner Circle membership was realized. He almost overlooked the opportunity. An application mailed to his office landed in a junk pile and went unanswered until the organization's president called him directly. McKeen dug it out, applied, and was accepted.

Today, in his fourth decade of plaintiff work, McKeen remains animated by the same motivations that launched his career. He is still energized by a well-run deposition. He continues to view cases from the client's perspective, acutely aware that no verdict can undo the harm they have suffered.



Brian joined fellow members of the American Association for Justice's National Finance Council in a successful fundraising effort for the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee. Pictured (l-r) are Caucus Chair Rep. Pete Aguilar (CA-33), Brian McKeen, Speaker Emerita Nancy Pelosi, Rep. Eric Swalwell (CA-14), and Chicago attorney Brad Cosgrove.

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"You can't bring the husband back who was killed by a procedure that was done wrong," he says. "You can't undo the brain damage a baby suffers because of a delay in delivery."

What he can do, he believes, is everything within his power to obtain the best possible outcome.

Outside the office, McKeen enjoys playing golf, spending time at his family's summer home in northern Michigan, and traveling with his wife, Brenda, whom he has been married to for 30 years. They have two children, Alex and Alaina, both in their twenties; Alaina recently took the LSAT and Alex is also considering law school as well. Yet even away from work, McKeen says his mindset rarely switches off.

"I try to make no distinction between my work and my play," he says. "When I'm doing litigation, I'm sort of playing at my work. And when I'm playing golf, I'm working on my play."

McKeen has also looked to the future of the plaintiffs' bar, establishing the McKeen Foundation to fund law school tuition for students who express a desire to pursue plaintiff work. He looks for young lawyers who are loyal, who want to grow, who are not afraid of confrontation, and who are devoted to obtaining justice.

"Some people shy away from confrontation," he says. "And to my way of thinking, change is impossible without confrontation."

Confrontation, he believes, is not only inevitable but essential – to civil justice, to social justice, and to accountability. It requires confidence, preparation, and a willingness to stand up and call out negligence in clear terms. One of his favorite sayings reflects that posture: you can't practice law on your knees.

"You have to be somebody who believes in their own intrinsic ability as an advocate, who can step into court and clearly articulate what it is that was done wrong, clearly articulate how that caused a preventable outcome, and motivate jurors to want to do something about it," he says. "You need to be able to inspire and motivate people to react to an injustice."

After more than 40 years, McKeen remains focused on staying at the forefront of plaintiff work, supported by family, mentors, and a career defined by effort rather than ease. The goal, as his father told him long ago, has never changed.

"I've tried to represent people in a way that my mom and dad would be proud of, that my wife and children would be proud of, and that will be an example to other lawyers in this field," he says.