

Trial Skills Academy can help attorneys learn winning habits, says founder of New Jersey firm

By Brian Cox

Steel sharpens steel.

That is the proverb Thomas Paschos references when he's describing the purpose behind the Primerus Trial Skills Academy. Tom believes strongly that attorneys improve and push each other to be their best through meaningful, challenging encounters.

The philosophy has shaped Tom's nearly four decades of experience in the courtroom and inspired the creation of one of the newest educational initiatives for Primerus. In an era when fewer cases make it to trial and young attorneys often spend more time behind computer screens than before juries, the Primerus Trial Skills Academy is designed to restore something many lawyers no longer experience naturally: learning the craft of trial advocacy by practicing alongside accomplished litigators willing to teach.

"Anybody can be taught how to try cases and try them well," Tom says. "I know that because I've been taught by some of the

best lawyers in the country. And for that, I am very grateful. I feel called to help my fellow Primerus colleagues become more so they can do more."

As managing partner of civil defense firm Thomas Paschos & Associates, P.C., in Haddonfield, N.J., Tom has spent more than 39 years defending and protecting professionals and corporations in professional liability, major general liability, employment, insurance coverage, products liability, and commercial litigation cases. Along the way, he has represented large health care institutions, major corporations, legal and medical professionals, public officials, insurance companies, and even judges in some of the region's most demanding courtrooms. His career has included successful appellate work, leadership positions throughout Primerus, and a J.D. and an LL.M. in trial advocacy from Temple University School of Law, an advanced LL.M. program from Temple Law's nationally ranked trial advocacy program that actually influenced the structure of the Primerus Trial Skills Academy itself.

Ironically, it was after more than a decade of trying cases following graduation from law school that Tom realized just how much more there was to learn.

"I thought I knew how to try cases after being out 13 years before I took the LL.M. in trial advocacy at Temple Law School. It was an intensive one-year law school program at night and on the weekends," he recalls. "But I really learned how to be a much better trial lawyer once I enrolled in the program. It gave me the confidence to start my own law firm two years following the completion of my LL.M. Trust me, it was not easy. My wife, Lucy, was expecting our fourth child, Joe."

(Joe is now an engineer and currently in his second year of law school. Tom and Lucy are blessed with six adult children and four grandchildren.)



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Thomas Paschos said a few words at Saturday night's dinner closing out last year's Primerus Trial Skills Academy.

Temple Law's year-long program immersed participants in simulated trials taught by many of the Philadelphia region's most accomplished litigators. Students worked evenings and weekends, trying cases repeatedly, receiving pointed critiques, refining their techniques, and returning to do it all again. Five of the 30 participants in Tom's L.L.M. class are now judges.

"So, by the time you got out of there," Tom says, "you had all the confidence in the world. You could try any case."

Perhaps more importantly, the program showed Tom that courtroom excellence isn't only a matter of talent or accumulated years in practice.

For years, Tom and Primerus founder Jack Buchanan had discussed creating an intensive trial advocacy program specifically for Primerus attorneys.

"I am very grateful to Jack Buchanan for his vision in starting Primerus and especially the Primerus Trial Skills Academy," says Tom. "If nothing else, I would like this Academy to be a shining light for all that Jack believed in and toiled for to make Primerus the successful organization it is today," he adds with an almost preacher-like passion, recalling Jack's great introduction speeches at the Primerus Global and Primerus Defense Institute yearly gatherings.

The goal of the Primerus Trial Skills Academy was to recreate an immersive environment where lawyers learn by doing – something Paschos believes has become increasingly rare.

"The way the law firm world worked in the past is that you learned by watching and then doing," he explains. "You would watch a lot of these trials. You would go to the courtroom all the time. You would pick up a style... But you don't have that anymore."

Modern practice has changed. Many civil disputes settle before trial. Young associates may spend years drafting briefs, conducting research, and managing discovery without ever standing before a jury. Even talented attorneys can develop bad habits simply because no experienced trial lawyer has had the opportunity to correct them.

"It's all about habits," Tom says. "You have to be taught how to do things right. You can have a hundred trials, but if you're not doing it right, there's no sense in bragging that you've done a hundred trials."

That observation became one of the driving forces behind the Primerus Trial Skills Academy.

Participants complete 10 recorded instructional sessions covering subjects such as evidence, opening statements, closing arguments, witness examination, and cross-examination. Those sessions establish a common foundation before attendees gather in Philadelphia for several days of intensive practical exercises.

Held at Drexel University's Institute of Trial Advocacy and Philadelphia's historic Court of Common Pleas, the program offers participants the opportunity to work through multiple simulated trials using real judges, live witnesses, jurors, and experienced faculty members who critique every phase of the presentation. The atmosphere resembles a trial boot camp, according to Tom.

The Academy welcomes attorneys from nearly every stage of experience.

Some participants arrive with only a year of experience. Others have spent decades in the profession but want to sharpen existing skills or become more proficient with modern courtroom technology.

"If you've been practicing for a while," Tom says, "you may need to learn and master today's technology that is used in courtrooms. And if you're just a young lawyer who wants to learn how to ask questions, trial skills can be taught."

For Tom, a seasoned professional, the point cannot be overstated.

"It's almost like playing competitive sports," he says. "Whether you're competing in Wimbledon or the FIFA World Cup, when you have to compete with some of the best, you have to get better."



Some of the Primerus members who attended the 2025 Primerus Trial Skills Academy mock trial event. (Front Row L-R: Heather Stover, Ilana Linder, Andrew Smith, Robert Brown, Sophia Alvarenga, Gary Shockey, Lance Duroni, Richard Schwerdtfeger, and Thomas Paschos; Back Row: James Corrigan, Jr.)

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Every accomplished athlete has a coach, he adds. Every elite performer continues refining their technique. Trial lawyers, he believes, should be no different.

Participants receive instruction on how and why experienced Primerus trial lawyers approach a case the way they do. They learn how to develop a persuasive theme, conduct effective witness examinations, incorporate courtroom technology, and prepare for every phase of a trial long before the jury is seated.

Preparation, Tom insists, begins almost immediately.

He recalls one legendary Philadelphia trial lawyer who would draft his opening statement and closing argument the day a new file arrived, allowing every subsequent decision in the case to support that central narrative. It's a lesson Tom continues to apply in his own practice, where the work of trying a case often begins months before anyone enters the courtroom.

"People think, 'Oh, you can just walk into a trial, and the trial starts that day,'" he says. "The fact is, the trial starts from day one, the day the case comes into the office."

That perspective becomes increasingly important as litigation grows more complex.

Tom describes stepping into high-exposure matters where previous counsel had completed discovery but failed to adequately prepare witnesses or establish a coherent strategy. Sometimes, he says, the mistakes become painfully obvious.

Those experiences reinforce his belief that effective advocacy isn't accidental.

"It is about preparation, preparation, and even more preparation," he says. "But it's also about the right kind of preparation."

That distinction is one reason the Primerus Trial Skills Academy places such heavy emphasis on coaching and immediate feedback. Faculty members help participants recognize habits they may never have noticed on their own.



The 2026 Primerus Trial Skills Academy will be held again at the Drexel University's Institute of Trial Advocacy. This year the Saturday mock trial rounds will be held at the Philadelphia's historic Court of Common Pleas.

Tom says some of his greatest professional growth has come from facing highly skilled adversaries who forced him to elevate his own performance. Others came from mentors who generously shared techniques developed over decades in the courtroom. Still others came from colleagues willing to challenge his thinking before trial ever began.

"My team makes me better," he says. "And frankly, I think opposing counsel also makes me better."

It is, once again, the principle of steel sharpening steel.

For Primerus firms, the benefits extend well beyond individual professional development. The Primerus Trial Skills Academy provides a place where firms can identify emerging trial lawyers, accelerate their growth, and expose them to mentors from across the Primerus community. At a time when many young attorneys have fewer opportunities to gain meaningful courtroom experience, the program recreates the apprenticeship model that shaped generations of accomplished advocates – only now on an international scale.

Looking ahead, Tom hopes the Primerus Trial Skills Academy becomes a permanent part of Primerus, continuing long after his own tenure as chair has ended. He is currently in his second year as chair.

"The goal is to have it every year," he says. "There's plenty of lawyers within Primerus who can benefit from this."

He also hopes others will eventually assume leadership roles, providing fresh perspectives while preserving the Academy's central mission.

After all, the program was never intended to showcase one lawyer's expertise. It was created to foster a culture in which accomplished advocates continually challenge, encourage, and improve one another.

Attorneys who want to practice at the highest level better know what they're doing, says Tom, or they can't expect clients to give them the hardest cases.

"You have to get to that level if you want to be in the game, to be at the pinnacle of your career, to compete with the best, to have fun and to win," he says frankly. "You have to be willing to put yourself on the line if you want to become a top lawyer. And you can't do that on your own. And you can't do it reading books, sitting in your comfortable chair or your comfortable air-conditioned office. You need to be in the arena. But before you get there, you must train and be willing to be trained. That is how winners are formed, molded, and inspired. Become more so you can do more."

That's what he means when he asserts "steel sharpens steel."