

LEGALLY SPEAKING
by John Ritter

THE PERSONAL INJURY LAWYER

My father, who was an insurance defense lawyer, told me that if he could do it all over again he'd be a Plaintiff's PI lawyer. When I was a law student and young lawyer he advised me to do the same but like most sons I ignored my father's advice and went into business and real estate law.

Now, 25 years later, my children come home from school with questions like "Dad, why aren't you a car accident lawyer like Jerry's father so you can drive a Porsche like him?" I often ask myself the same when I see the great wealth and esteem surrounding PI lawyers today.

Two things have happened even since I graduated from law school 25 years ago: Personal injury lawyers have grown in respect from fellow lawyers and have developed influence in the organized Bar. For the first half of the 20th century they suffered the stigma of being labeled "ambulance chasers" even as they prospered. (The advice at Yale Law School was to chase clients on the golf course and not to chase ambulances).

As the second half of the 20th century comes to an end, the Bar has admitted it is a business first and a profession second. Accordingly, personal injury lawyers have risen to the top of the Bar's business income charts with the affluence achieved from contingency fees and the large number of car accidents.

Because so many lawyers enter the profession in search of fame

and affluence, it is easy to see the attraction of injury law for attaining affluence. Attaining of fame is probably related since wealth equals fame in today's materialistic society. The Melvin Bellis and Gerry Spences win millions for their clients and become famous for the millions they earn for themselves. It would be bad taste to charge them with "ambulance chasing" because they are sought out by the injured who are underdogs against large insurance companies, corporations and government. As champions of underdogs they fit the American ideal of heroes, so it is no wonder that many young lawyers are attracted by the lure of injury law. The attraction is increased by the fact that many Bar Association leaders in large cities are personal injury lawyers.

Any history of law in the 20th century must include the increase in esteem between 1900 and 1990 granted to Plaintiff's personal injury lawyers both by the Bar and the public.