

# Law firm takes on its biggest challenge

BY MICHAEL R. SISAK (STAFF WRITER)

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PHILADELPHIA - They are two of the most prominent personal injury attorneys in this city. They have won multimillion-dollar verdicts against manufacturers, transit authorities, hospitals and utilities. And their firm represents more of former Penn State defensive coordinator Jerry Sandusky's victims than any other.

Matt Casey and Joel Feller trace their careers to their childhoods in Northeastern Pennsylvania. Casey, the youngest son of a Scranton political dynasty, and Feller, whose father owned and operated a pair of women's clothing factories in Hazleton, both said they learned early lessons on the importance of giving "voice" to the powerless.

"From my earliest point in childhood that I could remember, I always wanted to practice law," Feller said in an interview last week. "I always believed that people who had been injured need a voice."

Casey found inspiration in the legacy of his paternal grandfather, Alphonsus Liguori Casey, who attended Fordham University law school in New York at age 40 after a career in the Lackawanna County coal mines and a childhood cut short at age 12 by the death of his parents and the instant responsibility for raising his younger siblings.

Alphonsus, named for an Italian saint despite his Irish-American heritage, focused his second career on the work of the people, representing injured coal miners and coal workers who inexplicably lost their pensions, Casey said. He passed that philosophy on to his son, the former Pennsylvania Gov. Robert P. Casey, and his grandson, Matt, who bears Alphonsus as his middle name.

"He was my dad's hero, his absolute hero," Casey said.

Robert P. Casey, fresh from law school, took over one of those pension cases after Alphonsus' death and argued before the state Supreme Court. Robert appealed to the sensibilities of Justice Michael Musmanno, who was known to "favor the little guy in any fight," and won the pension back.

That same thinking governs the work of Ross Feller Casey, the firm Casey and Feller founded in 2006 with Robert Ross, a colleague from Kline & Specter, the firm founded by Hazleton native Tom Kline and Shanin Specter, the son of former U.S. Sen. Arlen Specter.

"That whole idea of the coal region work ethic was a big part of growing up in my house and in particular in Scranton," Casey said. "A lot of that is what led me to do the work that I do. Trying to help people who are up against powerful interests, who had terrible things happen to them and need someone to fight for them."

The firm boomed quickly, growing from three attorneys and three legal aides into a statewide practice with 12 attorneys and a substantial support staff.

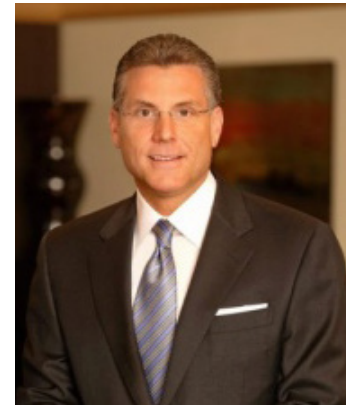
"We've been fortunate to have a lot of success," Casey said. "One of the distinguishing characteristics in catastrophic injury litigation is your ability to handle major cases and to obtain substantial jury verdicts. That's what we do for a living. We take every case with an eye toward trying it before a jury."

Casey's education was steeped in his family's Catholic faith, first at Scranton Prep, where he played basketball; then at Notre Dame, where he graduated magna cum laude and Phi Beta Kappa; and law school at Georgetown.

Feller was born at St. Joseph's Hospital in Hazleton and spent his formative years at the Locust Street and Heights Terrace elementary schools. He attended MMI Preparatory Academy in Freeland but switched to Hazleton Area High School for the 11th grade, "really with the goal of playing baseball there," he said.



*Matt Casey, originally from Scranton, is the son of former Gov. Robert P. Casey and brother of U.S. Sen. Bob Casey. Photo courtesy of Ross Feller Casey*



*Joel Feller is from Hazleton and has lived in the Philadelphia for two decades. Feller and Casey represent seven of Jerry Sandusky's accusers. Photo courtesy of Ross Feller Casey*

Feller, a 1986 graduate at Hazleton Area, played second base and pitched for the Cougars and worked as a short-order cook and bus boy at Franklin's Family Restaurant on Route 309.

Feller earned a bachelor's degree from the University of Maryland in 1990 and his law degree from the Widener University School of Law in 1993.

Feller has lived in the Philadelphia area for two decades. His parents and siblings have relocated to Florida, but he still returns to Hazleton whenever he has cases in the area.

"It was a wonderful place to grow up," Feller said.

Together, Casey and Feller represent seven boys who have accused Sandusky of abuse, including the four who testified or were mentioned during Sandusky's trial: Victim 2, the boy Sandusky was assaulting in a team shower when assistant coach Mike McQueary walked in and Victims 3, 7, 10, who described for jurors a pattern of enticement, fondling and forced sexual activity.

Their involvement, Feller said, spawned out of the firm's previous work on sexual abuse cases and the relationships they had with other attorneys across the state already involved in the case.

Feller and Casey are preparing a lawsuit against Penn State, where officials were accused of a cover-up, and said they plan to attend Sandusky's sentencing Tuesday in Bellefonte.

"The degree of abuse and manipulation that our clients have been through as a result of Mr. Sandusky's abuse and now living with the knowledge that this could have all been prevented by Penn State University is hard for these young men to put into words," Feller said during the interview last week in his office on the 34th floor of the iconic One Liberty Place building. "They've lost their childhoods. They've changed as human beings as a result of the abuse. Their lives, their ability to have relationships, their ability to function in society have all been changed."

A 3-foot statue of Lady Justice sat on a shelf in front of floor-to-ceiling windows that offered sweeping views the city landscape. To the south: the baseball stadium, Citizens Bank Park; the football stadium, Lincoln Financial Field, and the hockey and basketball arena, Wells Fargo Center. To the west: the Schuylkill River and the expressway of the same name; the legendary athletics venue Franklin Field and the Palestra; and the campus of the University of Pennsylvania.

Casey, delayed by a settlement conference on another in career of hectic afternoons, sat for an interview a few hours later in an adjacent conference room with the same panoramic windows.

An escape, of sorts, will come soon.

Casey plans to take time away from the courtroom to help his brother, U.S. Sen. Bob Casey, campaign for re-election later this month.

Casey's affinity for politics came at home - early and often. His father, a two-term Democratic governor, died in 2000. His mother, 80, still lives in the same North Washington Avenue home in Scranton from his politically charged childhood.

"We grew up with it," Casey said. "My earliest memories of my father were of his political races - just as a young boy, kind of worrying about whether he would win his next race, and following it religiously."

Personally, he said, he views politics as an "avocation" and enjoys his work in the law too much to consider a run for office in the near future.

"If politics ever became something to consider it would likely be way down the road, because I intend to continue what I'm doing for a very long time," Casey said.

Feller and Casey scoffed at the criticisms of their business, particularly the notion that filing a civil action is somehow unseemly or the idea that injured parties are attempting to get rich on multimillion-dollar judgments.

"An individual's right and ability to bring civil claims makes the world a safer place," Casey said. "We take a lot of pride in representing the people we represent because they, in most instances, don't come from the places in society where you'd expect them to have a whole lot of power or money and they're up against, a lot of times, a lot of power and a lot of money and they've been grievously harmed."