

JIM GRAVES

Compassionate PI Pro Fights for Michigan and Illinois Victims

by Sherry Karabin



LANSING—No one expects to get shot while on vacation, but that’s exactly what happened to Pierre Camy during a home invasion at an online rental property in the Caribbean in 2011.

At the time, Camy was having breakfast with family members staying at the property when three gang members broke in.

“I was shot and immediately paralyzed from the mid-chest down,” says Camy.

Extensive hospitalization and rehabilitation followed, but Camy’s condition did not change.

The family contacted several attorneys in 2011, but no one would take the case. Then, in late 2011, they met with James F. Graves, a partner at Sinas, Dramis, Larkin, Graves & Waldman (also known as Sinas Dramis Law Firm) and everything changed.

“We were just weeks away from the deadline of when we could file,” says Jolene Vos-Camy, Pierre’s wife. “I think Jim decided to take our case because he felt that we deserved some kind of compensation, and he cared about what happened to Pierre.

“He was very compassionate and considerate, but also very realistic,” she says. “He never made false promises. We did not know if anything would come of it, but we appreciated

his willingness to work on the case.”

Because the property owners resided in Chicago, Graves was able to file the state lawsuit in Illinois. After securing a judgment for his clients against the property owners in Cook County, Graves sued their Caribbean insurance company for “bad faith” under Illinois law. The bad faith suit was removed to federal court in Chicago.

“There were a number of practical obstacles since the shooting incident occurred outside the country,” says Graves. “It required taking days of depositions on the Caribbean island of the property owners’ insurance company adjusters and representatives.”

Due to a language barrier, Graves had to utilize the services of a local translator to conduct his depositions.

Graves and Sinas Dramis appellate attorney Joel Finnell prevailed on significant legal issues involving venue and choice of law in the federal court lawsuit.

Ultimately, the case was settled in 2016, following lengthy mediation. The settlement allows the family to pay for ongoing expenses related to Camy’s condition.

Camy has since become a member of a hand-cycling team sponsored by Mary Free

Bed Rehabilitation Hospital in Grand Rapids, Michigan, where Camy spent time after he was shot.

“We are very grateful to Jim,” says Jolene.

The Camy case is just one of numerous instances throughout his career when Graves chose to fight for the rights of victims in cases deemed unwinnable by other attorneys.

“My goal is always to help survivors and be part of the process of obtaining justice for them,” says Graves. “Some cases are not as straightforward as others, but I believe with perseverance and hard work a just result can hopefully be obtained.”

KEEPING UP THE TRADITION

Raised in Jackson, Michigan, Graves’s father, who was a lawyer, served as a pivotal role model. His father motivated him to become an attorney and to work diligently and ethically once he did.

“My father held high professional standards,” he says. “He was hard-working, ethical and civil at all times. He was the first in his family to attend college and was proud of his law degree from the University of Michigan.

“My father spent most of his career as general counsel and vice president of a large utility

company,” says Graves. “During the latter part of his career, he was the director of the research division of the Michigan Court of Appeals.”

Although Graves majored in business administration at the University of Michigan, he decided early on not to pursue a career practicing corporate law.

“My interest was always in the courtroom,” he says. “I saw myself as a trial attorney representing injured people.”

After receiving his law degree from Wayne State University Law School in 1972, he joined Willingham & Coté in East Lansing as an associate.

“Willingham & Coté is a full-service law firm with an excellent reputation,” he says. “I wanted to do trial work, and Willingham & Coté afforded me the opportunity. I was very fortunate to develop trial skills under the supervision and mentoring of founder and trial attorney John ‘Jack’ L. Coté.”

Graves stayed there for 29 years, becoming a partner and serving as its president. As time went on, his caseload evolved exclusively into a plaintiff personal injury and wrongful death practice, allowing Graves to find his true passion.

“I am grateful for my years at Willingham & Coté practicing with Jack Coté and other accomplished attorneys.”

TIME FOR A MOVE

In 2001, he accepted an offer to become a partner at the Sinas Dramis Law Firm.

Graves had known the managing partner of Sinas Dramis, George Sinas, since the 1970s. He also knew of the Sinas Dramis Law Firm’s stellar reputation in personal injury and wrongful death litigation.

“I admired Jim’s work and had great respect for him,” says Sinas. “One night, I was talking to one of my partners about lawyers I admired, and I mentioned Jim Graves. I said it would be great if we could get him to work for us, and my partner said, ‘Why don’t we try?’ A few weeks later, my partner ran into Jim at a social event and one thing led to another.

“It has been a tremendous experience to have Jim as my partner,” says Sinas. “He is an exceptional lawyer and a student of the law who understands the art of litigation.

“He exhibits great humility and has a wonderful demeanor that makes everyone want to hear what he has to say,” Sinas says. “Jim is a real team player who is as tireless today as when I first met him.”

Graves, who handles personal injury and wrongful death cases in Michigan and Illinois, says the key to winning cases starts with the selection process.

He begins by carefully analyzing the facts to determine available claims, theories of recovery, defenses (such as statute of limitations,

governmental immunity, the open and obvious doctrine and comparative negligence), injuries, damages and collectability.

“In Michigan, if the injured party is more than 50% at fault, a claim for non-economic loss damages such as pain and suffering, loss of society and companionship, is barred,” says Graves.

When assessing damages, factors such as the extent and nature of the injury and disability, medical costs, permanent disfigurement, loss of income and the egregious nature of the negligence of the at-fault party are also taken into account, he says. In Michigan, there are no punitive damage awards.

LONG HISTORY OF SUCCESS

During his career, Graves has litigated cases ranging from automobile negligence, semi-truck collisions, motorcycle and bicycle crashes to product liability, premises liability, medical malpractice, nursing home negligence and sexual assault and abuse.

A number of his wrongful death and personal injury cases have made and continue to make headlines. While the majority of the matters he handles are settled, many involve extensive litigation that lasts for years.

Graves has sued on behalf of families who lost loved ones in the 1979 American Airlines

crash at O’Hare International Airport, obtaining a favorable federal court ruling in Detroit that allowed his clients’ claims for pre-impact flight and terror of the deceased.

He represented a family in the case of the Pan Am 103 terrorist bombing over Lockerbie, Scotland, which took 10 years to conclude. Graves also represented numerous women who suffered reproductive injuries from the use of the Dalkon Shield contraceptive IUD.

In the late 1990s, Graves represented a client whose son died as a spectator at the U.S. 500, CART FedEx race at Michigan International Speedway.

Graves says the wheel assembly and tire of an Indy-style racecar came off when the car lost control in a turn, causing the parts to vault over the fence into the spectator section. The flying debris killed the son of his client and two other spectators, and it severely injured others.

“The track fencing failed to adequately protect spectators,” says Graves. “We sued several defendants, including the speedway, FedEx and Penske Motor Sports arguing they failed to take proper precautions to protect spectators from crash debris,” says Graves. The case was settled for an undisclosed amount.

Graves and a team of lawyers also sued on behalf of the family of a 17-year-old, Deven Guilford, who was stopped by a county sheriff’s



department patrol deputy after “flashing” the officer with his high beams. Graves argued the deputy used excessive force.

“Guilford flashed his high beams to let the deputy know his patrol vehicle’s high beams were blinding Guilford and instead he was pulled over, forced out of the car by the deputy, tasered and eventually shot on the side of the road,” says Graves. *Guilford v. Frost* was settled in federal court in 2017.

In 2018, Graves and co-counsel Jennifer Irmen of the Irmen Law Group in Chicago obtained an \$800,000 settlement in the trial of a complicated sexual assault. The assault took place in the laundry room of a Chicago apartment building.

An intruder who was never apprehended gained access to a common area in the apartment building where Graves’ client was a tenant. The case charged the owners of the building with negligence for failing to maintain appropriate building security.

More recently, Graves represented numerous survivors in the largest sexual assault scandal in sports history against Larry Nassar, who was a team doctor at Michigan State University and USA Gymnastics for decades. Nassar was sentenced in 2018 after pleading guilty.

“I was among the first group of lawyers who represented the initial wave of plaintiffs,” says Graves.

In all, 333 survivors sued Nassar and Michigan State University in 2017. The suit was brought in federal court in Michigan, with a historic global settlement of \$500 million reached in 2018.

Graves continues to represent plaintiffs in suits against USA Gymnastics and the U.S. Olympic Committee.

In addition, Graves is currently representing a family who lost a loved one during the 2014 Flint water crisis.

Officials switched water sources in order to reduce costs, failing to adequately treat the water, which led to elevated lead levels and Legionella. Graves’ client died of complications from contracting Legionnaires’ disease.

DRIVEN BY PROFESSIONALISM, SERVICE

Vincent Spagnuolo, a partner at Murphy & Spagnuolo, has worked with Graves many times over the last 40 years.

“We are usually on the opposite side of matters,” says Spagnuolo. “Jim is a consummate professional who comports himself with courtesy and civility. He is a stalwart attorney to work with if you are on the same side of the case, but if you are opposing counsel, you should expect him to represent his client to the fullest.

“I have referred cases to him over the years

because I know he is the right guy for the job.”

A longtime member of the Michigan State Bar, the Illinois State Bar Association, the Illinois Trial Lawyers Association, the American Board of Trial Advocates, the American Association for Justice and a sustaining member of the Michigan Association for Justice, Graves also is a former president of the Ingham County Bar Association.

He is a founding member, former president, fellow and board member of the Ingham County Bar Foundation, which has raised over \$100,000 for local charitable programs consistent with the foundation’s mission.

Outside of the legal profession, Graves is a former officer and longtime board member of the John D. Voelker Foundation, which was established during Voelker’s lifetime.

Voelker was a Michigan Upper Peninsula prosecuting attorney and a Michigan Supreme Court justice, a renowned novelist, an outdoor writer and a fly fisherman. He is known for his bestselling novel, *Anatomy of a Murder*.

“John sought to perpetuate his love of the outdoors and healthy cold-water fisheries where trout thrive, through his fly-fishing writings,” says Graves. “The foundation’s mission includes providing financial scholarships to qualified Native American students attending law school.”

At age 72, Graves plans to keep practicing for at least another few years.

“It’s personally gratifying to help my clients in need of legal representation with the support of my partners and associates, who are all outstanding lawyers,” says Graves.

He spends his spare time fly-fishing, traveling and attending Michigan football games with his wife Shirley, a retired elementary school teacher and graduate of the University of Michigan. The two celebrated their 50th wedding anniversary this year.

They have two adult sons. Jason is a large-scale muralist, artist and designer who formed the custom screen printing and graphic design company Apollo Ink Printing—Arts & Branding in Boulder, Colorado. Blake is a Chartered Financial Analyst charterholder and director of ETF Portfolio Management for Milliman Financial Risk Management in Chicago.

Blake and his wife Akanksha, a marketing manager with RSM, have one son Duke, who Graves and his wife “love spending time with.”

Graves has some advice for attorneys who choose to focus on personal injury litigation.

“You have to be patient and roll with the punches while keeping your eye on the ultimate goal,” he says.

“Always be ready to try the case, even if you think it may settle.” ■