JOHN KRALOVEC

An Optimist Who Helps Families Heal After Injuries and Tragedies

by J.J. Bailey



A year and a half ago, John B. Kralovec had a life-defining moment when he was diagnosed with cancer. In the months that followed, as Kralovec went through treatment and eventually beat the disease, he did what everyone would do in his situation. He took stock of his life.

"One of the things you think about is, 'What do I do for the rest of my life?' he says. "Well, I thought, 'I kind of like my life now. I think I want to just keep doing it.' That's really the conclusion I've come to. I enjoy what I do for a living."

Kralovec, a founding partner of Kralovec, Jambois & Schwartz, is one of the most highly regarded personal injury attorneys in Illinois. He has obtained record-breaking verdicts for his clients, has been recognized nationally as one of the best in his area of practice, and has earned the respect of colleagues, clients and opponents alike.

But when he assessed his career in the wake of life-changing news, it was the personal investment in his craft that called him back—the chance to help people at the most vulnerable point in their lives.

"He is a white knight," says Scott Garrison, a client of Kralovec.

Garrison was involved in a horrific motorcycle crash in Missouri in 2015. He ended up losing a leg, and he spent years recovering. What followed the accident was mounds of insurance paperwork, a potential civil case, and the need to navigate the complexities of healthcare bills.

"It was turning into a nightmare," Garrison recalls. Kralovec's firm, initially hired to pursue civil action against the driver who injured Garrison, stepped in to handle everything, even after it became clear pursuit of the civil action would go nowhere. And the firm did it at no charge.

"The answer from John and his firm was, 'If anybody calls you, you give them my phone number, you have them call me. You're going to get bills in the mail. You fax them to our office.' They handled everything."

Kralovec also helped Garrison's wife through the entire process, acting as a counselor as she navigated the endless stresses of an injured spouse. That kept her from having a breakdown, she says.

"That was one of the most profound statements he said to me," Garrison remembers. "He goes, 'Your job is to get better. My job is to handle all this rigmarole. You get better, we'll take care of everything else.'"

It's granting that peace of mind to clients—the chance to make a terrible situation better—that drives Kralovec, even if he can't solve all the issues.

"I don't have the chance to open up their chest and fix their hearts or to replace their knees or their hips or to do brain surgery," he says. "But what I can do is try to put a family back together or help a guy who's lost his livelihood as a result of having a limb cut off. Or a family that loses the dad. I can be their advocate. I can be that guy who beats up the bully on the playground."

A FORCE OF NATURE

Kralovec has always thrived on competition. One of nine kids, about half of whom went to college, he learned early how much better victory felt.

"I liked games, and I liked to prepare, and like to win. I have an incredible fear of losing," he says.

When he followed an older brother's example and went to law school, he found his calling as a litigator.

"What I loved about law school were those classes that got you on your feet," he recalls, "whether it was trial and appellate advocacy or whatever courses you had that got you up and speaking in front of other human beings."

He graduated from Loyola University School of Law in 1981, and his love of legal argument was paired with an obsessive drive to understand every aspect of a case.

Early in his career, Kralovec was an attorney for Roger Stillwell, an ex-Bears defensive lineman who was suing the team doctor for negligence.

Kralovec and his wife were hosting a Fourth of July party at their home, but he couldn't focus on the festivities. He needed to understand the cause of Stillwell's injury.

"There were probably 60 people at our house, but I had to figure out the mechanism by which this guy's leg almost got torn off. So, I watched the same football play over and over

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and over again for probably two hours until I could figure out who stepped on his foot and kept it from moving. I had to explain to the jury how this thing happened," he says. "My wife came in about halfway through and said with a giggle, 'You understand that this is a sickness. We got 60 people out there!' I said, 'I'm not going to be a very good host if I can't figure this out. It's driving me crazy.'"

While Kralovec is a relentless study outside of the courtroom, his colleagues describe him as a force of nature during trial.

"He has a larger-than-life persona," said Alexander Sukhman, an attorney and previous associate at Kralovec, Jambois & Schwartz. "John has this remarkable ability to have the entire case be about the case he's trying, despite any defense lawyers or any opponent's efforts. It was never about the case that the defense was trying. Nobody can do what John does, and you have to see it in a courtroom to believe it."

His ability to command a courtroom, to control the narrative of a case, is fueled by his passion for his clients. The relationship he builds with clients during their case has become his primary driver as his career goes on. He has a small collection of gifts from clients he keeps as a reminder of why he fights so hard in every case.

"I still start pulling stuff down off the shelves in my office and say, 'That was really cool. I had an opportunity to know this person. I had an opportunity to do something for this family.'"

Most recently, he received a letter from a woman who remembered Kralovec from when she was 9 years old and he represented her family.

"It was probably 18 or 19 years ago, and it was a malpractice case that involved a fairly young father. He had a wife, the daughter and one son, and I took care of the case," he recalls.

"I hadn't heard from the family because you rarely do. You're sort of a reminder of a horrible time in their lives. But in June of this year, I got a letter from that little 9-year-old girl who said, 'I just graduated from Carleton College up in Minnesota. And the reason I was able to go was because of what you did for my family.' Those are the things I treasure."

'ALL YOU DO IS WHAT YOU CAN'

It's no surprise, then, that the case Kralovec had the strongest emotional connection with ended up being the biggest verdict of his career.

In July 2000, Albert Garner was driving a cargo van for the Mayor's Office of Special Events. Garner, along with five others, was on his way to set up an inflatable playground for a community party.

En route to the party, Garner's van was crushed by a dump trailer truck when its driver hit an overpass. The driver had left the trailer in the up position, and when he hit the overpass, it detached and fell onto the van.

Two of the occupants were killed. Garner became a quadriplegic.

Even now, nearly 20 years after the case, Kralovec remains intensely passionate. As he starts recalling the details, he interrupts himself.

"Albert Garner was one of greatest human beings I've ever met," he says. "Even though he was a quadriplegic, he never blamed anyone. He never got angry. He just, he was Albert, and he was just a good guy."

The case was referred to Kralovec from a friend of Garner's family, and once he looked at the details of the case, he knew he couldn't go for a settlement. He had to go to trial.

The insurance policy on the truck only covered up $6 million, and as Kralovec puts it, "Albert's needs were far in excess of that."

> **"To this day, he'll call and just say, 'Linda, how are you doing?' He's doing it because he felt a certain way when we were working together. I was never unsure of what he was doing. It was always, always good. Always."**

The city of Chicago had an insurance policy covering underinsured drivers, but it disputed whether that applied to Garner's case.

"The city of Chicago's insurance carrier was disputing it. So, I had to get a verdict in order to show, number one, that it applied and, number two, what the damage was. That was why we had to go to verdict. No question about it."

As he prepared for the case, he also focused on guiding Garner's family through the process. Once again, he was there for the most tragic moments of someone's life, trying his best to right a wrong.

"He cared about what I was feeling," says Albert's mom Linda. "He made me aware of everything that was going to happen, what to expect. It helped start to mend a big hole in my life."

Kralovec won the case, securing a record-setting $51.8 million for Garner. While the money attracted headlines, Kralovec knew the number didn't represent anything more than a chance for Garner to get some of his life back.

"To Albert, it really wasn't a whole bunch of money. It was an opportunity," he says. "It was enough money to make sure he could have a nurse so his mother wouldn't have to give him baths. Can you imagine what it's like to be a 27-year-old kid and have your mother give you a bath?"

REMEMBERING, REMAINING OPTIMISTIC

Garner died a couple years after the verdict, suffering a fatal blood clot. In the years after his settlement, he regularly donated money to his community, something his mother continues to do today.

After Albert's death, Kralovec was invited to give the eulogy at his funeral.

"That was a huge honor for me because he was such a special guy," Kralovec says. "That's the biggest accolade you can get."

What Kralovec carries with him, even when he wins a case, is the emotional pain of the moment. His successes, while they can help a family heal, are born from tragedy.

"Nobody wants to be your friend when this is over. They all love you. They all think that you've done a wonderful job for them, but you're also a reminder of a hellacious thing that was a part of their life that they would choose not to relive if they could," he says.

"Obviously, you can't do what I do for a living and not have a positive attitude about life. You have to be looking forward. You gotta be optimistic."

That optimism comes from the next case, the next time a white knight is needed to right a wrong. It comes from the gifts from clients in his office, reminders that when families were at their most vulnerable, he did everything within his power to protect them.

"You see a family who comes in to see you, and they're a mess. All you want to do is say, 'Here, take all my money. Go home and take care of your family,'" he says. "You can't do anything about it. All you can do is what you can do as a lawyer," he says.

Kralovec does more than just be a lawyer, and that makes him special. Even after the case is over, after the court battle is won, he doesn't forget. He remembers his clients and what they've gone through, and he continues to do what he can to help. Even something as small as a phone call can mean the world to a former client.

"To this day, he'll call and just say, 'Linda, how are you doing?'" Garner says. "I say, 'I'm doing really good. Everything was in place.'

"He's doing it because he felt a certain way when we were working together. I was never unsure of what he was doing. It was always, always good. Always." ■

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