

The Road To Justice Starts Here



celebrating our 15-year anniversary and the journey that got us here

A Letter from Attorney Michael T. Gibson

In April, our firm celebrated our fifteenth year of being in business. Honestly, it truly feels like we just celebrated the ten-year anniversary. Maybe that is because life and the entire world took a strange detour in the Covid pandemic years. Regardless, the last five years have flown by. But fifteen years is a pretty significant milestone for any business. And it is certainly a great time to pause and reflect on everything that got us to this point, and to contemplate where we are going.

When I think back to the formative, early years, there are two things that I think made this place work. The first was hustle. If someone sent us a case, we were all over it. The minute that referral was made, four people were battling each other to jump on the phone, and get that client. My initial staff understood that there was nothing more important than getting that case signed. The second thing is that we were not afraid to take difficult, and sometimes even impossible cases. In fact, most of our early work was the cases that other firms were rejecting. We took those cases and worked them like they were the biggest cases in the office. No matter how bad the facts were, or even if two or three other firms had tried and failed, we took that case, and in the vast majority of them, we found a way to get that client a recovery. Almost every day during that time, I would have other attorneys comment or tell me how crazy I was for taking on some of these cases. But I knew that if we could find ways to make recoveries in those difficult cases, people would come to see that we could handle just about any personal injury case there was, and they would trust us with more valuable cases down the road.

One of the other traits that built this place was brutal honesty. I cannot tell you how many times my life would have been a lot easier if I just told every client in every case that their case was the best case ever, and we were going to get them a bunch of money. But that is just not my style. You see my family was once one of those cases in someone's law firm. And I watched that lawyer tell my mother for four years how great her case was. Ironically, most of these conversations occurred when he was trying to get her to pay his bill. Four years later, after she had spent every dime she had, he told her there was nothing he could get her. Even writing this out, it still makes me angry and disappointed in that attorney.

I was never going to do that to my clients. From day one of this firm in 2009, everyone here has understood my rule on this. We are going to tell it to you straight. The good parts of the case, and the bad. And we will always give you a realistic and reasonable evaluation of your case, even if that is disappointing. I have lost clients because of this, and it sure has cost me a number of folks who would have been clients, if I just told them I was going to get them a bunch of money. But for me, I would rather be honest and forthright, even if it disappoints someone, than to mislead them. Over the years, I have had a number of clients fire me over

Michael T. Gibson, P.A. 2420 S. Lakemont Ave, Ste 150 | Orlando, FL 32814 | (407) 422-4529 | www.autojusticeattorney.com



this. And you know what? About fifty percent of them have reached back out to me, within a year or two, and begged me to come back. I always believe that honesty is the best policy. I live my life telling people exactly how I feel. I have run my practice and firm, the same way.

Probably the biggest challenge I faced over the fifteen years was in building the team around me. In the beginning, I was the CEO, CFO, head litigation attorney, head presuit attorney, lead marketing guy, HR, and probably twenty other titles. But I also had a pretty important new title at home – Dad, and I wanted to really be good at that one. I worked twelve and thirteen hour days for almost five years. I worked on the weekends. I worked on vacations. That entire five-year timeframe is just filled with one memory – My office and my desk. When I look back today, I am amazed that my health survived, and that my marriage survived.

But around year five was when I started realizing that if this firm was going to make it long-term. I could not be all of these things. And I started recruiting and assembling a team around me, and a management structure, that would allow me to not have to be everything. It started by hiring another full-time attorney to manage and oversee our growing caseload. Then it was a marketing director, to help grow the firm. Then another attorney. Another litigation staff member. In 2014, after serving as the Head Litigation Attorney through the firm's first five years, I decided that I would bring on a seasoned trial lawyer, and I would move out of litigation. I did so because the firm was just beginning its largest growth spurt. I remember one of my last trials, I was going to make an objection to a question, and a line from my marketing budget started to come out. And at that moment, I knew it was time. My whole career up to that point had been centered around being a trial lawyer and trying to be a great one. But in opening the firm, and getting it past those first five years, I realized that my calling was to lead the firm and to grow it. To be the best at that job, I had to admit that it was time to give up litigating and focus solely on the office. While this was a difficult transition at first, it is probably one of the best decisions I have made.

From that year, and on through 2020, the firm took off and completely changed. We organized what we call POD teams and split the office into the same. We had the capability to litigate and take to trial any case we needed to. I hired Juan Jose Rodriguez to be my Marketing Director, and combining his vision and my own, our community marketing program began. We grew from an office of fourteen employees to an office of thirty employees over the next five years. And our revenue tripled. In 2017, our then chief litigator retired, and I hired a young lawyer by the name of Todd Curtin to replace him. Within a year of that decision, our litigation department had doubled. In Todd, I had finally found the perfect replacement for myself as a litigator. He had boundless energy and enthusiasm. I focused on making sure he got all the support and resources he needed to make our litigation team successful.

If you ask me, my favorite years in the history of the firm were 2018 and 2019. In those two years, I saw everything the firm could be. Some of our biggest and best cases were during these two years. And with all the resources and personnel we had amassed, we were able to max out recoveries in those cases. It was a real turning point for us, and it felt like we had finally entered the big leagues. We were growing at such a rapid pace in that timeframe, that I was looking at more office space in our building and beyond. For some reason, in the middle of 2019, and while looking at that office space, I decided I wasn't going to take the space, and that I would make our existing space work. Little did I know that within the next year, that would be a very wise decision.

When the Covid pandemic hit, everything that we had achieved from 2014 up and through that time came to a sudden halt. When the stay-at-home orders came out, it was pretty devastating to our business. With almost no cars on the road, our new case intakes went down by over 70% in the span of just thirty days. There were days where it was so bad, I was calling the phone company to see if the phone still worked. On top of the massive drop in business, we had to take our entire operations and make them completely remote. Everything changed, from how we handle new client intakes, to how we handle accounting. We changed it all. For intakes, we went to virtual and phone meetings, and we installed docuSign, so clients could sign without having to meet in person. We developed a staff rotation system, to rotate team members in and out of the office, and to minimize how many people were in the office at a given time. All of our management and team meetings went virtual and onto Zoom as well. Covid forced us to change almost every single aspect of our then current operations, just to continue operating at all.

My greatest fear during this time, was how long would it take to get our intake levels back to where they were before, and could I sustain all the current staff during that process. I quickly figured out that the pandemic was not going to go away overnight. This was a two to three year deal, and it would affect us for at least that period of time. So, after ten years of building this firm from scratch, I was again forced to decide if I was going all in. And I did. I probably spent over \$2 million dollars between 2020, and 2022, to keep this firm going. I chose not to make dramatic reductions in staff or in advertising. In fact, I doubled the advertising. Some thought it was crazy. But I made this decision after reading about Kellogg's and Post cereals during the Great Depression. I forget which one had the monopoly, but the long and short is one brand cut their marketing and lost half their market share, while the other doubled theirs and gained 50% of the market. If we were ever getting back to our pre-pandemic market position, I had to double down. I hired an agency



2 | June 2024 | www.autojusticeattorney.com



to buy our TV spots. Changed web marketing companies, and even brought on more marketing staff. Over the course of the next year, our mission was to rebuild everything that took the previous ten years to build in the first place. It wasn't easy, but within 14 months, we were back to our pre-pandemic numbers, and we have stayed there.

I don't think people realize how difficult of a business running a personal injury law firm is. You cannot successfully handle a decent volume of car accident and personal injury claims without investing in quality staff. And getting quality staff means you pay them. Our lowest paying positions within the firm now pay what some of our highest paid positions paid just five years ago. There is health insurance, 401k's, PTO, annual, quarterly, and monthly bonus plans. And there is the time spent training and teaching how we do things and why. All of these things cost millions of dollars a year. But I look at them as an investment. And the more I have invested in my employees, the more it has come back to me, and the more we have recovered for our clients.

We are also not immune to inflation. Almost every single vendor of ours is charging 2-3 times more than five years ago. However, unlike other businesses, who pass increased costs on to their customers, our fees are capped, and we cannot do that. When faced with a choice of giving a staff member a raise or adding new members to better and more efficiently handle the workload, I have always chosen to invest the money in our staff.

And then, there is the ruthless competition. Two of the largest personal injury firms in the entire country are right here in our backyard. They spend over \$30 million dollars a year in just this market. So, I am outspent about 30-1 by them. In addition to them, there are a number of lawyers engaging in illegal and unethical solicitation schemes. We do not participate in these activities, and we adhere to and abide by all laws and rules against these practices. But those two factors account for about 80% of the market. The 20% that is left is fought for by an overabundance of lawyers.

I have never sought out to be a mega firm. I do not want to manage hundreds of lawyers and thousands of staff. And I do not want this to be a firm where clients feel like a number, and not a person. This does not mean that I will not eventually open another office or expand. But I know that I have no desire to be a nationwide firm, or expand beyond the reach of Florida. I have always had a desire to return to my hometown in the Tampa Bay area, and we have built a good presence and following there. But one of the blessings of the pandemic years is that we learned that we could handle every aspect of a case, anywhere, entirely via virtual and remote technology. Most court events are now done on Zoom, saving hours of travel time, and allowing us to be anywhere at anytime. This has allowed us to further expand our horizons. Today, we have handled cases in almost every county in Florida.

As I write this today, we are currently the fifth largest personal injury firm in the Central Florida market. If you had told me back in 2009, that fifteen years later we would be in the top five firms, in the third most competitive market in the country, I would have told you I would take that. And as proud as I am to have endured all the challenges I outlined in this article, there are two achievements that I am most proud of.

The first is the charitable work and community service the firm has done and continued doing. When the firm started, my goal was always that this would not just be a place where people go when bad things have happened to them. I wanted us to be an agent of good, and to give back to the community that supported us. When Juan Rodriguez joined the firm, he outlined a similar vision, and it was the first time in those formative years that I had someone who could help me build and execute that goal. Since that time, our firm has taken on some of the largest challenges facing our home community, and beyond. We were there to support the families and victims of a terrible mass shooting at a local salon. We provided countless hours of free legal help to the victims of the Pulse shooting, through the One Orlando Fund. We organized and flew food, essentials, and power generators down to Puerto Rico following a devastating hurricane. And we organized and staffed multiple local food banks during the pandemic. In fact, we continue organizing and manning those food banks today. Currently, we are organizing and running five mission trips a year, around the globe, including trips to the Dominican Republic and to Cuba. I receive emails, daily, from these places, thanking us for our help. Additionally, we support local Pastors, churches, and community organizations, all with the goal of helping those in need. I cannot tell you how proud I am of our community programs and our charitable endeavors. As we continue to grow, this program will always be at the center of our firm.

And lastly, this firm started on an ideal of commitment to family, mainly my commitment to my family. The major impetus that pushed me to open this place in 2009, was the impending birth of my first child. I could have easily stayed at my former firm, and climbed the ranks, made partner, and probably a very good living. But at the time, I was traveling 4-5 days a week, taking depositions across the country. Once we knew that Brady was on the way, I knew that I wanted to be a father that was there for his children. I wanted my kids childhood memories to include me, being there at significant events, and just being there daily for them. My father



www.autojusticeattorney.com | June 2024 | 3

MICHAEL T. GIBSON P.A.
 AUTO JUSTICE ATTORNEY
 2420 S. Lakemont Ave, Suite 150
 Orlando, FL 32814
 (407) 422-4529
www.autojusticeattorney.com

celebrating our 15-year anniversary AND THE JOURNEY THAT GOT US HERE



SEE PAGE ONE

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worked almost non-stop when I was a kid. And I always felt that most of my childhood memories did not include him. It was something I wish I had more of as I became an adult.

Jen and I started the firm so that we could support and be there for our children. And while in the early years, it seemed almost counterintuitive, due to how much we worked, I can tell you that the payoff is the time we have now. I have been able to spend countless hours on the ice with Brady, being there as he has developed his love for the game of hockey. I have been to almost every game he has ever played, and for the last three years, I have been able to help coach his team, and travel with him. Jen is at every dance practice and dance competition with Emery. We both attend all school functions. And we are able to take two family vacations a year. And by vacations, I mean a real vacation, where we are not plugged in or answering calls or emails all day (although I still make time for these on these trips). As I write this, Brady is finishing his freshman year in high school, and Emery is getting ready to enter middle school. The time has really flown. It really hit me a couple of Saturdays back, when I watched both of them come to the kitchen, and toast their own bagels. I spent like ten years making their breakfast. Now, they don't need either one of us to do the same.

As challenging, scary and difficult as it was building the firm, it pails in comparison to raising our kids. And doing both tasks simultaneously, every day, for fifteen years, these challenges became second nature. But to be able to enjoy our remaining years with our kids at home, it makes every single challenge we faced worth it. The firm also gives Jen and I a living example to show our kids the value of hard work and perseverance. They can walk into our building and see what Mom and Dad worked so hard to build. I am often asked if we want the kids to succeed us, and to enter the family business. The truth is I just want them to be happy and to be able to support themselves and their families. I don't really push either of them towards it. If one or both of them decide they want to do it, I will support them and teach them everything. But the firm was my dream, and I am blessed that I got to live it. All I want for them is the chance to live their own dreams.

In closing, Jen and I want to take this opportunity to thank each and every one of you for your support and trust over the years. When a client chooses us to help them in their time of need, it still means as much to us today, as it did back in those early years. We will always do our best to make this firm feel more like a family, than a law firm. And we will always strive to make this a place that clients can be proud of. We are both honored and blessed to have the opportunity to support and help this community, and our commitment to continuing those efforts are unwavering. Thank you for every thought and prayer you have directed our way, and thank you for believing in us and supporting us. With your continued support and God's blessing, we will continue through the next fifteen years, and write many more chapters in the history of this firm. ■

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