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the SPEED LAW *firm*

Uncovering the Answers to Medical Mistakes

By Jan Jaben-Eilon

Laurie W. Speed was 8 years old when she learned an essential life lesson that set her on course to become an attorney. A swimmer since age two, she started excelling six years later. “I started swimming really well and gained confidence,” she recalls. “I learned that if you practice at something, you will get good at it. This helped in school and in my emotional growth.”

It’s also helped her professionally. After 14 years of

experience litigating complicated personal injury and medical malpractice cases, Speed has not only been recognized for her swimming abilities – winning awards and scholarships that took her to Emory University and Emory Law School – she’s repeatedly received accolades for her work.

Most recently she was elected to serve as an executive officer of the Georgia Trial Lawyers Association, after co-chairing the professional liability and medical malpractice continuing

education courses for two years. She has been selected as a Georgia Super Lawyer and previously as a Georgia Rising Star by Atlanta Law & Politics for eight years in a row. On top of that, she was selected by her peers as one of Georgia Trend's Legal Elite for the past seven years. Last year, she received the Young Alumni Service Award from the College of Arts and Sciences at Emory, where she studied English and women's studies. "Colleagues say the proof is in the pudding – that you must win in trial – but respect from my peers is also important," she acknowledges.

Swimming, however, was not the only experience from Speed's Tennessee childhood that factored into her professional choices and success. When she was in the ninth grade, her father, an attorney, was the victim of medical malpractice. He had gone undiagnosed with encephalitis for too long. When he had seizures, he was strapped down, which permanently disabled his shoulders. He sued and won, but since his clients were doctors and doctors are a tightknit community, his legal career was finished.

"My parents didn't let me attend the trial, but we were in a small town and people talked and took sides," recalls Speed. "This made me more passionate to help the underdog. It made me tougher and I can better understand what my clients have gone through." Her father encouraged her to become a lawyer, and a litigator. A competitive person, she understands what it means to put everything on the line and take risks.

"This helped me as an athlete and as a trial lawyer. I can handle risks and pressure. I know I may lose and that's OK," Speed says, pointing out that statistics show plaintiffs lose 90 percent of medical malpractice trials because of the high regard our society has for doctors.

Speed explains that she must reject many of the cases that are brought to her, but not because they are frivolous cases. "Something definitely had gone wrong, but it's hard to take a case that is a judgment call. A doctor may have made the wrong decision, but the question is proving negligence," she says. "I explain the burden of proof (that is necessary to win a case). We must prove the doctor is negligent and we must find another doctor to testify against the doctor. The way I've developed my practice is that I read all the medical records, synthesize the

case and know whether to hire an expert or not. I may have to tell my potential clients that we don't have a winnable case, but I can help them get answers to what happened with their care and treatment."

Most people come to her because something has gone wrong medically, and their questions have not been answered.

Indeed, one of the joys in her work is being an advocate for clients. "Clients have had doors closed on them and no one is giving them information and they feel powerless," she says. "I can help them get access. In fact, I've had to threaten doctors with lawsuits just to get a client's medical records." By law, however, those records must be provided to patients within 30 days of their request.

"I tried to stay away from medical malpractice because of my personal history," Speed says, "but it ended up being a good fit for me with my clients."

The path that led her to launch her own private practice, The Speed Firm PC, in 2010, was not straight. She began her career at Chambers, Mabry, McClelland & Brooks in Atlanta, defending insurance companies in general tort liability cases. "I was trying cases in my first year," she says.

When a few of the firm's partners left to form Chambers, Aholt & Richard, she was the only associate asked to join them. The focus of the new firm's work was building a plaintiffs' practice. Speed set her target on the nursing home business. "I wrote an article in the Georgia Bar Journal in 2002 about litigating nursing home cases that kick-started my practice," she says. After tort reform in Georgia was passed in 2005, she received even more medical malpractice referrals.

Today, her practice is about 80 percent medical malpractice cases and 20 percent general personal injury cases. "In an ideal world, that would be 50-50. I try about one or

two medical malpractice cases a year, while I can handle many more personal injury cases. Medical malpractice cases take a lot longer to resolve," she says.

While medical malpractice is her specialty, she also enjoys helping her clients navigate the insurance claims process after other personal injuries. Drawing from her insurance defense background, Speed helps victims of auto collisions obtain the money they need to pay medical bills, get the future medical treatment they need, recover lost wages, and moreover, be

“A doctor may have made the wrong decision, but the question is proving negligence.”

made whole for the pain and disabilities caused by others' negligence. She has clients throughout Georgia, assisting them in wrongful death suits and serious personal injuries. Her medical malpractice cases have included misdiagnoses, improperly administered anesthesia, birth injuries, surgical mistakes and emergency room errors.

Although there are other great lawyers in her practice area, clients like the fact that Speed is a good listener and has compassion. "One of my best skills is making people feel comfortable. I may not be great at math or spelling, but I have a skill that can't get me A's in school," she laughs. "It's all about relationship building. You must be a good lawyer first, but then, as a trial attorney, people must be comfortable with you. To me, this is not work. I love what I do."

One of the first partners she worked with when she was starting her career, told her not to be impatient about generating cases. "He said, 'Don't worry. You are planting the seeds and building relationships.'"

At one point, Speed decided to attend a luncheon event of the Georgia Association for Women Lawyers (GAWL). Soon she joined committees and steadily built those relationships. She eventually served as the 76th president of GAWL, and as past-president, she chaired GAWL's advisory board. In 2007, Speed was asked to chair GAWL's newly formed judicial application review committee which vets applicants for statewide judicial vacancies and reports to the governor's judicial nominating commission.

As part of her service with the GTLA, she sits on the board of directors of the Civil Justice PAC, a non-partisan political action committee dedicated to supporting candidates for office in Georgia who are committed to preserving the civil justice system. In addition, Speed has served as the chair of the Georgia Intrastate Moot Court Competition Committee for the Young Lawyers Division of the State Bar of Georgia.

Despite all of her experience, Speed says she was nervous to go out on her own. "I was nervous about the financial aspects," she says. "I realized, though, that I was generating my own cases and litigating on my own. But it was important to call my own shots and execute my own strategy."

While she has employed associates and paralegals, the nature of her practice calls for her to be personally involved in all aspects of her cases. "In order to vet, litigate and try my cases, I have to have reviewed and know all parts of my case, including every medical record, so this lends itself to a solo practice." She has also been called by others to co-counsel their cases, which she enjoys.

Speed sees a parallel between her athletic and professional life. "I know I can handle the cases on my own, but it is also fun to be a part of a team," she says. But what really sets her apart, she says, is how she focuses on her clients. "I give people individualized attention. They get me, not an associate or secretary. This distinguishes me from others," she says. "The fact that I'm a small firm brings value."

AT A GLANCE

THE SPEED FIRM, PC

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PRACTICE AREAS

- Serious Personal Injury
- Medical Malpractice
- Wrongful Death
- Auto Collisions
- Nursing Home Abuse & Neglect

BAR ADMISSIONS

- State Bar of Georgia
- Georgia Superior and Supreme Courts
- United States District Court for the Northern District of Georgia
- United States District Court for the Middle District of Georgia
- United States Court of Appeals for the Eleventh Circuit
- United States Supreme Court

EDUCATION

- Juris Doctor, Emory University, 1999
- B.A. in English & Women Studies, Emory University, 1996

COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT

- Georgia Trial Lawyers Association, Executive Committee
- GTLA Civil Justice Political Action Committee, Board Member
- Lawyers Foundation of Georgia, Fellow
- Lawyer's Club of Atlanta
- American Bar Association
- American Association for Justice
- Georgia Trial Lawyers Association
- Atlanta Trial Lawyers Society

HONORS & AWARDS

- 2013 Rising Star by the Fulton Daily Report
- Georgia Super Lawyer, 2014
- Georgia Rising Star 2005 -2013
- Georgia Trend's Legal Elite 2007-2013
- Named Top 40 Under 40 in Georgia by the National Trial Lawyers, 2012
- Emory Distinguished Alumni Award