

# *Cliff Steele, Marquette lawyer* Resilient. Resolute. Remarkable.

BY ANDY HAAS SCHNEIDER



H

enry David Thoreau famously remarked, “If a man does not keep pace with his companions, perhaps it is because he hears a different drummer.” The drumbeat followed by Clifford Steele has a cadence set by many life experiences, among

them his years at Marquette Law School.

Despite a recent serious cardiac illness and nearly lifelong orthopedic challenges in his spine, Steele, a 1977 Marquette Law School graduate, has persisted diligently throughout his life—working hard, playing hard, and loving much. This is reflected in the countless professional and personal accomplishments he has enjoyed. His life reflects much goodness and exemplifies what a Marquette lawyer can be.

Steele was born in New York City in 1951, the child of professional parents. “My dad was a nuclear chemist and active Democratic politician, and my mom was a newspaper editor and school librarian,” Steele recalled. He was raised in New York and in Paramus, N.J., where he attended high school and played varsity baseball—a hobby that stayed with him as he entered his law school years. “I

was a not-so-successful wrestler in high school and college as well, earning letters in each sport,” Steele said, “and had the lead part in my high school play. I am convinced that the latter helped lead to my career as a trial lawyer.”

He attended Ohio Northern University prior to transferring to Rutgers in New Jersey, where he was admitted into Phi Beta Kappa and, in 1972, earned a bachelor’s degree in political science with a minor in English literature.

The symphony of Steele’s life is composed of many, many notes, mostly sweet, some discordant, a few unscripted.

His professional path made an abrupt turn just as it was about to begin—a turn that set the course for a lifetime of service and commitment to justice. Steele was already accepted, enrolled, and ready to begin law school at Temple University in Philadelphia, when his uncle, Dr. Frank Campenni, suggested he try Marquette and learn what a wonderful place Wisconsin would be to live, study, and eventually practice law. Steele heeded his uncle’s advice. “I fell in love with Milwaukee—the predominant aspect being the kindness and decency of its

people (certainly not its climate),” he recounted. “I thank the many deans, professors, and Milwaukee lawyers for helping me make the decision and ensuring that I went to Marquette.”

Steele stayed in Milwaukee for a number of years after graduating from law school in 1977. His continuing gratitude to Marquette Law School is evident in his staunch support of the school and its endeavors. He gives of his time as well as his treasure and is among the Woolsack Society donors.

Steele noted that, since his graduation from law school nearly 30 years ago, he has seen the torch lit by the late Dean Howard B. Eisenberg passed along through interim Dean Janine P. Geske to Dean Joseph D. Kearney. “The impressive quality of the new faculty and the incredible impacts made by those three individuals are remarkable,” he said.

So what has transpired for Steele in these 30 years since graduation? His first job as an attorney was as an assistant public defender in Racine County in 1977. He was then recruited by the Public Defender’s Office in Milwaukee in 1980, eventually leaving to join the law firm of Coffey & Coffey, where he worked exclusively on criminal trials and appeals. Steele then opened his own firm with Marquette classmate David Geraghty and fellow attorneys Chip Burke (now a senior trial attorney for the Eastern District of Wisconsin Federal Defender’s Office) and Neil McGinn (now a senior trial attorney with the Wisconsin State Public Defender’s Office in Milwaukee).

In 1983, Steele married Mary Schafer, who worked at the Shellow & Shellow law firm (formerly partners with the Coffey brothers), and they moved to Florida and took a year sabbatical in the Islamorada area of the Florida Keys. “I studied for the Florida bar exam in between fishing, diving, boating, and teaching Mary to respect—but not fear—barracudas, sharks, and the other marine life that became a special part of our lives for that year.” He passed the exam and was admitted to the Florida Bar in 1984. While living in Florida for that year, Steele was asked to return to Milwaukee to head a litigation section of a small firm on Michigan Street which ultimately grew and was named Cunningham, Lyons, Steele & Cramer, S.C.

A few years later Steele was recruited by a Brickell

Avenue litigation firm in Miami (which had always been his dream place to practice), where he decided to “reinvent” himself into a civil/commercial and ad valorem tax trial lawyer. This, in turn, led to his representing Victor Posner, who in the 1960s and 1970s was one of the wealthiest men in America and had ownership interests in literally hundreds of public and private companies. “It changed my life,” said Steele. “I made the fortune I wished for—well, at least part of the fortune I wished for—all the while remaining steadfast in honoring the principles I learned while at Marquette.”

“I was in Mr. Posner’s inner circle for 14 incredibly exciting years,” Steele recalled. “I think that I worked harder even than Professor Ray J. Aiken preached to us in first-year Civil Procedure—lectures on the benefits of hard work that I fondly remember.”

Success came at price, though. “It almost killed me,” explained Steele, “and I seldom had time with my family or a vacation that wasn’t interrupted by a frantic call directing me to fly somewhere to prepare and prosecute an injunction or lawsuit. Marquette Law School taught me that we, as trial lawyers, can and must learn to quickly master



a subject and study the law and also know the facts of every case better than anyone else in the courtroom—that was the lesson I retained from the late Chief Judge John Decker, an extraordinary Evidence professor at Marquette Law School. My single-most favorite thing, aside from boating and diving, is (or was) trying jury trials.”

In 1992, Steele and his family barely survived the unforgiving wrath of Hurricane Andrew. They lost everything from their home to their family’s history of photographs and belongings. As the rooms were being shredded and the roof torn away by 160-mph winds, Steele was tied at the waist to the remaining doors, while Mary huddled under a mattress with toddlers in the remaining interior bathroom. The house was obliterated, but they survived. “We all prayed a lot through that ordeal,” he said. “We started over once again.”

Steele has had many pursuits, beyond those already mentioned. He founded and co-owned Rudy’s Mexican Restaurant in Milwaukee from 1985 until he and his family moved to Miami in 1989. Rudy’s won *Milwaukee Magazine*’s “Best Mexican Restaurant” award twice. He is a licensed Florida mortgage broker, licensed Florida title insurance broker, and licensed to practice law in Wisconsin, Florida, and Hawaii. When he could no longer practice law because of health complications and numerous spinal surgeries, Steele worked in title insurance and banking and also as a Miami-Dade County administrative law judge deciding ad valorem tax appeals.

Steele is especially dedicated to protecting and representing the most innocent among us—children—in matters of sexual abuse. This was the focus of his community involvement of which he is proudest: being a founding director of Kristi House, a special facility that provides child victims of sexual abuse a healing environment through community collaboration and system coordination. Kristi House is a nonprofit agency in Miami formed because sexually abused children were falling through the cracks of the social service and criminal justice systems, which often were a confusing and complicated patchwork of government

programs. Kristi House offers multiple services under one safe, welcoming, healing roof for the victims and their families.

Kristi House and the work that it took to establish it are tangible examples of how a Marquette lawyer has made a positive impact on a large community far from the Milwaukee area. The expanse of the efforts and dedication of people such as Steele stretches from coast to coast and touches countless people, often those most in need.

Steele recently needed to resign as a director of Kristi House because of his physical disabilities but is proud to have been part of establishing it. He credits his wife, Mary, for the other community and church involvement. “I can help with the money, but she gives the sweat, the compassion, and provides for the needs of many. She may not have graduated from Marquette, but she has every trait a Marquette person should, and often does, demonstrate, quietly seeking no applause or thanks.” Mary is a graduate of the University of Wisconsin—Milwaukee.

Steele has to his credit a \$6.7 million verdict in a Miami child sexual abuse case featured on Court TV. This was a personal and professional victory that meant a great deal to him. Steele stood up, as someone who has personal knowledge of what it is like to be such a victim.

Looking back on all of his undertakings, Steele is pleased that his life has unfolded in the manner it has: “I tried some of the highest-profile cases, was on Court TV trying a jury trial for three weeks, met business tycoons that I had only read about in the *Wall Street Journal*, tried cases against the largest firms in the country, and became involved in community projects and politics I would have thought I would only be able to dream about,” he said.

He and Mary have been married for 23 years, have three children, ages 15 to 20, and live in Pinecrest, Fla. Despite his health challenges that have rendered him fully disabled (he now awaits a heart transplant at the University of Miami’s cardiac transplant program), Steele remains customarily optimistic, passionate, and hopeful. •