The Texas Lawbook

Free Speech, Due Process and Trial by Jury

Q&A with Trial Lawyer Michael Lyons

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Since he was 8 years old, Michael Lyons knew he wanted to be a trial lawyer. But a part of him also wanted to be a doctor.

There was a major roadblock on his path to a career in medicine: He had a phobia of blood.

"I had a childhood incident where I almost bled to death," Lyons said. "It was a complication from a tonsillectomy."

Even at the mere mention of this, Lyons began shifting in his chair during a December interview with *The Texas Lawbook*.

Still, Lyons took the medical school entrance exam just to see how he would do. A flurry of letters from medical schools followed, urging him to apply to their programs. He never did.

"I felt like my interest was always to be a lawyer, but my aptitude was to be a doctor," Lyons said.

The legal career has turned out just fine. In his recent work, Lyons helped obtain an $860 million verdict — the second largest of 2023 in the state — for the parents of a woman killed in her Dallas apartment when a 200-foot steel crane toppled onto her building from an adjacent construction site. Lyons continues to represent former tenants who are suing Greystar Development & Construction and its related entities, which were the owner, developer and construction contractor of the site, and Bigge Crane and Rigging, the owner and leaser of the crane.

Last month, Lyons helped a San Antonio family obtain a $109.5 million verdict against CPS Energy as a result of a residential gas leak explosion that seriously injured two people and destroyed all of their possessions in their rental home. Robert Rymers is permanently disabled as a result of his injuries and suffered extensive burns. His mother, Virginia Rymers, was burned and also suffered an air embolism as a result of the blast, jurors were told.

Photo courtesy of Lyons & Simmons

Last year, Lyons also helped clinch a $37.5 million verdict for the family of a trucker who was killed in Dallas by an Oncor driver. And he was a lead lawyer in litigation that stemmed from the 2021 Astroworld music festival in Houston. Lyons represented the family of Danish Baig, a Dallas-area man killed while saving his fiancée from the deadly crowd surge. The case settled.

Baig was a hero, Lyons said, and Lyons is a student of heroism. An avid reader,

Lyons concentrates on what makes a hero and how they're portrayed in stories. He recently finished reading one of the books by William H. McRaven, the retired U.S. Navy four-star admiral who served as chancellor to the University of Texas System.

Lyons seems to find heroes in his cases. In the $37.5 million case against Oncor, Lyons handled the task of direct-examining a Good Samaritan who held and consoled Shamsher Singh as he died. Lyons told the Good Samaritan he is a hero in a note Lyons wrote to him after the trial.

Lyons discussed who his heroes are, his knack for connecting with people and more in the following Q&A.

This interview has been edited for length and clarity.

What would you point to as some of the biggest trials you've handled ever?

The crane case was a really big one. Personally, the biggest trial that I ever handled was actually a trial in Midland, Texas, that we tried in 2021 because of what it stood for. The case was about a woman who lived in Alabama. She was an African American woman. I want you to think about what was going on in mid-2021: social justice and protests. This woman was divorced, three of her four children resided with her ex-husband, who was a combat vet, who'd suffered a traumatic brain injury and was not the same person. Her ex-husband and three children were killed in a terrible car accident. We kept being told in the lead-up to that case that a jury in Midland County was not going to award your lady from Alabama a bunch of money. And we proved them wrong on that. We were suing an oil and gas defendant, and there were a lot of complications with the liability in that case. But we tried it, and we got what I believe is the largest verdict for a wrongful death case in Midland County. So you can define what's the biggest case you've ever been a part of based on a lot of different things. It's definitely not the biggest verdict I ever got. The proposition is everybody is entitled to justice regardless of what they look like, what their socioeconomic status is, where they're from. So I'm proud of that.

Are there a few high-profile public matters that you're currently involved in that we can highlight?

I have a case that's going to trial in 2025. It involves a young lady who was crossing the street in front of her home and was run over by a garbage truck. The defendants in that case refuse to take any responsibility. It's on video, so you can see it happen. She's walking back from a community swimming pool, crossing the street, and a trash truck just drives over her. Regardless of whether it's a high-profile case or not, it upsets me as a parent.

I think the case that we're about to try in Bexar County is a big one. We're suing CPS Energy, a gas company, and that's going to attract a lot of attention. This explosion was on the news when it happened. There are some liability facts in the case that are challenging, but we feel strongly about the case. This is a mother and her son. He's an adult child, but they're both intellectually disabled. But they were living their lives happily when their house blew up. The son, who was 45 at the time, was burned very badly. If we were to encounter a life altering, disabling injury like that, it'd be terrible, but we have the intellectual capacity, the coping mechanisms, to deal with it in a way that's better than someone who's intellectually disabled. It's like they don't have the ability to cope. So it's a tragic case.

We've got some other ones that are really big cases that haven't been filed yet. Stay tuned.

What news, developments or trends in law are you particularly keeping an eye on at the moment?

Obviously, the current presidential regime, the current election, we just had and the political ripples that's had on our judiciary is big. We just had a turnover on our Dallas Court of Appeals, so that's a big changing of the guard. You're

going to have new justices, and how that does or doesn't change the current court, we'll just have to wait and see on that. But obviously, regardless of what you do or how you practice, if you're a trial lawyer, you're always concerned about what's happening on the second floor of the courthouse where the Court of Appeals sit, so new justices mean new trends that we could see out of the Dallas Court of Appeals. The chief justice of the Texas Supreme Court is changing. So, in terms of the leadership of that court, what does that do?

In terms of trends, I would say, since COVID, what we have seen nationwide, really, is juries that are angry at corporate America. I think they really felt squeezed. I'm speculating some, but let's just assume that I spent a lot of time talking to people, whether it be through focus groups or actual juries, about what people's feelings are right now. And a lot of people are frustrated economically. They're frustrated about socioeconomic disparity. They're frustrated politically. The fact that our government can't get laws passed, and we saw another school shooting yesterday. Nothing's going to be done because of political issues, special interests, dark money. I don't care if you're a Republican or a Democrat; no one's satisfied with what's going on. And so what you're seeing is, I think, jurors that think, "I can do more good sitting on a jury, legislating this case and this issue, than I can serving in congress or voting for a particular person, because nothing gets done." So what we've seen is a trend in verdicts that have gone up. Insurance carriers and big corporations raise their eyebrows and get real concerned about that, and the automatic reaction to that is "We've got to institute tort reform" but it doesn't address what the underlying reason for that is. I'd like to think it's all because of great plaintiffs lawyers making great arguments, but really what it is is the public sentiment that's changed about companies.

Are there any bills that you're particularly keeping an eye on?

There are bills that basically would cap non-economic damages for ordinary citizens. Those are the people that ultimately pay. It's not the giant companies or insurance companies. They'll pass other people's tragedies on to taxpayers to cap damages. I get 50 calls a month saying, "They gorked my husband in the operating room." Sorry, you're capped. Let's get you on some governmental programs, but no lawyer is going to take your case because there's no financial incentive.

What is a trial that you weren't involved in that you wished you had been?

Astroworld. I would have loved to have tried that case. All the death cases were settled. I would have liked to have tried that case for two reasons. One, our firm was really meaningfully involved in the development of that case. And that's not to discredit anyone else, but we had a very meaningful involvement and took a lot of the depositions. I would have liked to have seen it through. And the second reason that I'd love to try the case is because of just how interesting it was, factually. Obviously, it's a terrible tragedy. It was disgraceful what happened to those kids. It still makes me really upset. But there's a really interesting story within that case, both from a corporate America standpoint and from an engineering science standpoint of how this happened. There's social cultural issues with how this happened. You know, you think about what was going on in November of 2021. Concerts were just starting back up again. People were really wanting to get out and be a part of something outdoors and be a part of a concert. And so a lot of that dictated what happened. I would have loved to have been a part of that.

Do you have any pre-trial rituals?

Yes. My mentors that trained me always said, "You have to be a master of both the facts and the law in whatever case you're about to try," so you really have to know the case. So I would say, as a ritual, I try to put my hand on and look

at every document. In some cases, that's not possible because there's so many documents. But if there's a cache of hot documents, I make sure that I'm intimately familiar with them. I read every deposition. I look at every discovery response.

I think the other ritual is knowing and talking to your witnesses and knowing their backstory. A lot of times you won't know that until you sit across from them. Let me give you an example. I tried a case earlier this year involving an Oncor service truck that hit the back of an 18-wheeler. The driver was standing outside the cab of the truck when the truck got hit. He gets crushed and dies. There was a good Samaritan who came across his truck and found him. He truly is a hero. He's a combat vet Marine. He was with his family on a Sunday, and literally, was the last person that my client talked to before he died. I met this guy. He's just a big, strapping dude. You would think, just a tough, tough guy. I remember talking to him, and I remember thinking, "This guy is never going to break." I told him I appreciated what he did, because it meant a lot to my client's family to know that there was a person there that was with him. And there was something that I said to him that really triggered him, and I could tell that it made him very emotional. What's interesting about that is that, ordinarily, you might want to try to use that to invoke sympathy from the jury, to get a measured sympathetic response to the witness's testimony. But my father was a combat vet Marine, and I remember thinking, "I'm going to stay away from that," because I could tell he was a very prideful person — rightfully so. And I did not want to embarrass him. He did a great job on the witness stand. He was one of the most impactful witnesses in the entire case. But you would never know any of those things unless you sat down with the person and talked to him. So, ritualistically, I think it's really important that you talk to your witnesses ahead of trial and actually meet with them.

What is your favorite task to handle at trial and what's your least favorite?

I love doing closing — who doesn't? — and I love picking a jury. I like talking to people. And I'd say a close third would be cross-examining adverse witnesses. But speaking to people and connecting with them, I think is the strength that I have.

One of my biggest mentors is Robert Hirschhorn. And Robert, in my opinion, is the most talented trial consultant and jury consultant in the country. I use him in all my cases. Robert said, "You can't win a trial in jury selection, but you can lose it." You've got to make sure you've got the right jury. There's so many things that go into that — knowing who your best jurors are, or perhaps a better way to say it, who your bad jurors are. Which is effectively, how you pick a jury — You de-select people.

And your least favorite task to handle?

I hate the lead up-to trials — the pre-trial exchanges and the prep and all that. I despise that. I also don't like the jury charge. People far smarter than me handle that. It's perilous. It's full of pitfalls that can get you flipped. There's just a whole lot of esoteric stuff that goes into what should or shouldn't be in your jury charge.

How do you celebrate after a trial win?

The thing that I love about being a trial lawyer the most is the impact that it has on your clients. But oftentimes, because of the type of law that I practice, no one's going to be holding any parades, because they've lost a child or a spouse or somebody's got a terrible injury. I'm very satisfied with the outcome most of the time. But the other kind of secondary thing that's just really exciting is the bond that you have with the people that are in the foxhole with you. It's really like being on a team, like a football team or a volleyball team or a softball team, whatever. Everybody's rooting for everybody. Everybody's trying to put everybody in the best position to do well. And so when you're done, it's always nice to stand back and just be appreciative. We try to do that.

We've got all kinds of ways of blowing off steam. I've grabbed people before and said, "Let's go to Vegas for a couple days" or "Let's go to my lake house in the hill country."

But it's always really good to get back to your family. I've got three little kids and a wife, and I would say that's actually the thing I usually hate the most: The time away from my family. The prep and the lead up to trial — that sucks in terms of the heavy lifting — but the worst part is, I don't know how many times I've been in trial and it's like, this holiday or so-and-so's birthday.

If you weren't a lawyer, what career do you think you would have chosen instead?

That's difficult, because I've known since I was 8 years old that I wanted to be, not just a lawyer, but a trial lawyer. My stepmother worked for a trial lawyer for 40 years plus, and I just knew that was my calling, and so I knew what I wanted to do. But if I wasn't a trial lawyer, I really wanted to be a doctor. I took the MCAT. But I knew that I couldn't, because I have kind of a blood phobia. I had a childhood incident where I almost bled to death. It was a complication from a tonsillectomy. It really made me not a candidate to be a doctor. So what's interesting is I felt like my interest was always to be a lawyer, but my aptitude was to be a doctor. I had really high scores on science and anything science related. But the reality was that I was not going to be able to do that.

What am I not asking you that you'd like to share with our readers?

If someone were to ask me what do you think is the most effective use of your time outside the courtroom to make you effective inside the courtroom, I would say that I read a lot. I absorb a lot of information about people and about cultures and about how people think. One of the things I've read a lot about is heroism. Everybody loves heroes. I have always loved heroes, and I've studied them, but heroism and the different ways you could be a hero and the different parts of that is really important. I don't care if you're a writer and you're writing a story or you're telling a story to somebody or you're trying a case — you always have a villain and a hero. You can be the hero, but oftentimes it's going to be somebody else. But in order to know that, you would have to really know what it is that makes people like other people.

I also study things like what motivates people. In the state of Texas, for example, we have so many different cultures and different socioeconomic and demographic things that influence how people think. Take, for example, the case that I had in Midland where it was 98 percent for President Donald Trump. People would say Midland County is a terrible venue to try a case in if you're a plaintiff. I don't necessarily disagree that it is a difficult venue from a damages standpoint, but one of the things that I've learned in reading and paying attention to this stuff is that you have to meet people where they are, which means you have to know how to talk to them. And if you don't know how to talk to them, you're never going to be able to convince them that you're right about something. That also means that you have to understand how people think and what their value system is and what they value, so that when you position your case to present your facts, you're not emphasizing or deemphasizing something that doesn't resonate with the jury. And there are umpteen different ways that we did that in the case of Midland, but that's completely different than how we would focus a case and try a case in Dallas County, for example. So I would say that's probably the most important thing that I do on a regular basis.

I get up every morning at five o'clock in the morning and I read. I read case law, and I read stuff that updates me as a professional on what I do, but I also read things that are more human interest. I'm always reading two or three books at the same time so that I cover the waterfront of things. Because if you don't stay current on what people are thinking about and why, how are you going to talk to people?

Who's your favorite hero?

I'm kind of a military history person. Across military history, there have been a bunch of really incredible people that have influenced me. Audie Murphy is pretty awesome, and he's from this area. He's one of the top 10 most decorated people of all time. I just got done reading Bill McRaven's books. I think he's really a tremendous hero. He's also just very thoughtful. The things that he's written about are really amazing. My biggest hero is my dad — a combat Marine who has since passed away — but not necessarily for his military exploits, but because of the kind of man that he was. He really helped me as a person develop. Now I have small humans that are dependent on me. It's like having big shoes to fill. But I think you want your kids to have heroes that they can look at and think, "That's achievable" or "I can emulate that." That was my dad to me. He was definitely my hero.

