A Bright Light in the Face of Catastrophe

Paul D. Bekman '71 had one vision for his future when he graduated from the University of Maryland School of Law nearly four decades ago.

"I hoped that I could somehow, some way make a difference in people's lives," says Bekman, today a partner with Baltimore's Salsbury, Clements, Bekman, Marder & Adkins.

Mission accomplished. But by no means over.

The winner of the School of Law's 2010 Distinguished Graduate award has long been—and continues to be—involved in some of Maryland's most high profile catastrophic injury cases as an advocate for clients facing life-changing experiences that inflict heavy emotional, physical, and financial damage.

"I can make their lives a little bit easier," Bekman says. "By giving them some security, it can help make their futures a little brighter."

Throughout his career, Bekman has had a hand in nearly every major maritime accident case in Maryland. He helped secure a substantial settlement for relatives of passengers who died in the 2004 Inner Harbor water taxi accident. And he recently filed a $35 million lawsuit against Baltimore City on behalf of a fire department cadet who died in a flawed training drill three years ago.

It would appear Bekman is more than living up to the expectations of his high school classmates from the New York Military Academy, who voted him "most likely to succeed"—boosting him over charismatic classmate Donald Trump.

Bekman was born in Washington, in 1946, but his father's State Department job took the family to South Korea when he was 12. (Four years of military base life left a lasting impression on his golf game. A soldier on base named Orville Moody taught Bekman to play. Moody would go on to win the U.S. Open in 1969.)

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Bekman—five-time club champion at Chestnut Ridge Country Club—attended the U.S. Air Force Academy for three years, where a law course spurred his career ambition. He finished his senior year at the University of Maryland and went straight to law school.

Two of his proudest professional accomplishments since then include a U.S. Supreme Court victory and admittance to a distinguished organization for top lawyers.

The Supreme Court case in 1985 centered on an age discrimination lawsuit that he filed for Baltimore firefighters forced to retire at 55. An appeals court had reversed his trial court victory, but the nation's highest court sided with a 39-year-old Bekman—unanimously.

Eight years later, Bekman was admitted to the American College of Trial Lawyers, an exclusive invitation-only group that counts only 1 percent of the nation's lawyers as members. Since 2006 he has served as one of the group's 15 regents, overseeing the selection process for lawyers in Maryland and Washington. He was also named to the Best Lawyers In America list for more than 20 years in five categories: personal injury litigation; medical malpractice; products liability; maritime law; and alternative dispute resolution.

The former president of the Maryland State Bar Association (1997), the Bar Association of Baltimore City (1993), and the Maryland Trial Lawyers Association (1986) has been married for 41 years to his wife Arlene, an elementary school vice principal. He has two daughters, who are both attorneys married to lawyers.

"They're not only great lawyers, they're great people," said Bekman, 64. "I'm very proud."

Since 1983, members of the state bar association repeatedly elected Bekman to serve on the committee for nominating judges. After the job changed to an appointed position, Gov. Martin O'Malley tapped Bekman.

Bekman has also been a leader in his service to UMDLaw, serving for the last eight years as chairman of the Board of Visitors. In addition, he was chair of the School's $20 million new building campaign and has established the Paul D. Bekman Leadership in Law Scholarship, which provides tuition support for an outstanding member of each incoming class.

"Paul Bekman epitomizes what lawyers should do: serve their profession, their clients, and their community," says Thomas D. Murphy '73, president-elect of the Maryland State Bar Association. "He does all those things."

—Doug Donovan