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PERSPECTIVE

Keeping the Balance

Trial defense boutique Yukevich Cavanaugh isn't afraid to take cases to court.

By Shane Nelson

Special to the Daily Journal

Longtime trial attorney James J. Yukevich doesn't have any trouble explaining why his corporate defense firm has such impressive offices.

"People come in here and say, 'Wow, this place is beautiful. How did you do it?'" explained the Yukevich Cavanaugh founding partner. "And I've said to them on many occasions: 'This is all the result of plaintiffs' attorneys that wouldn't take the money we offer them.'"

First opened in January 1995, Los Angeles-headquartered firm is now home to 23 attorneys and has expanded to San Francisco and San Diego. The trial defense group has represented a host of familiar names over the last 27 years, including corporate giants Honda, Ford, Ferrari, Chevron, Ritz-Carlton, FedEx and Michelin.

"We've had cases where offers that have been in the tens of millions of dollars have been turned down," Yukevich said of settlement discussions with plaintiffs' attorneys who sued his clients. "And we've turned those cases to zeros. That's a fact."

Yukevich didn't start out defending corporate America, however. Raised in Western Pennsylvania, he completed his legal degree at Boston College Law School and then worked for four years at the Bronx District Attorney's Office in New York, where he prosecuted homicides and other major crimes.

"I got to try a lot of cases, and I learned about how serious things



James J. Yukevich and Todd Cavanaugh at their office in Los Angeles | Justin L. Stewart / Special to the Daily Journal

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can be and how to handle witnesses, how to handle police officers," he recalled. "That really was a dream to me. It's what I wanted to do, and I got a chance to do it."

Yukevich was later recruited by the founder of a New York defense firm and started working regularly on cases for large automotive companies. He spent time in the early 1990s on loan as

acting general counsel for American Honda Motor Co., a role that first brought him to Southern California.

"When I came, I never thought I would stay in California. This was supposed to be a temporary assignment," Yukevich recalled. "But like a lot of people that come to L.A. and come to California, temporary sometimes quickly be-

comes permanent."

Always interested in running his own firm, Yukevich hung a shingle in Los Angeles, and in those early days, the bulk of his work was defending auto manufacturers. The firm's other name partner, Todd A. Cavanaugh, joined a little over two years after the boutique was launched, and according to Yukevich, he's

been invaluable ever since.

“Todd is one of the smartest lawyers I’ve ever known,” Yukevich said. “He’s an extremely nice guy and very modest — so much so, in fact, that I try to tell him he shouldn’t be so modest.”

Raised by a public school teacher and a police officer in St. Paul, Minnesota, Cavanaugh went to William Mitchell College of Law there before starting his legal career at a large Minnesota firm. But he was looking for more responsibility and a chance to try his own cases. Yukevich offered him both.

“We’re a trial firm,” Cavanaugh said. “I think we’ve created a niche and have a reputation for really not being afraid and trying cases a lot of people don’t think can be won.”

The firm defended Ferrari in 2019 against a plaintiff who claimed

he had to cut his way out of a defective seat belt with a knife after a fiery crash in one of the luxury automaker’s sports cars. The driver suffered severe burns while trying to escape the blaze, and coverage of the Calabasas accident was picked up by national media outlets including CNN, which broadcast footage of the melted remains of the Ferrari. *Aslan v. Ferrari North America Inc.*, 16-CV02574 (C.D. Cal., filed April 14, 2016).

Accident reconstruction was extraordinarily difficult based on the little that was left of the car, but it was a critical component of the \$9 million product liability trial, according to Yukevich, who said the jury came back with a defense verdict after just over 20 minutes of deliberation.

“None of them really, in the end, based upon all the things

we did, believed the testimony of the plaintiff,” Yukevich said of the jury. “All of the facts were very, very pro-Ferrari, and that’s why we won.”

Los Angeles plaintiffs’ attorney Brian J. Panish, who has opposed Yukevich in jury trials, called him an excellent trial lawyer.

“He’s as tough as they come, but fair,” Panish explained. “I really respect him. He’s a top lawyer — no question. ... And he’s got top clients — Ferrari, Range Rover. These high-end product manufacturer defendants come to him for his ability, and they can hire anyone they want.”

Cavanaugh was also quick to praise his partner, describing him as a tremendous mentor who’s always been impressive in court.

“He’s a cleanup hitter among cleanup hitters — sort of the Hank Aaron of defense trial law-

yers,” Cavanaugh said.

Yukevich noted that many defense attorneys are now getting ready for trial on some difficult cases they were unable to settle during the closure of so many California courts during the pandemic. But like his partner, Yukevich said his firm has never been afraid to try tough cases, and that’s more important now than ever.

“That’s what keeps the system working,” Yukevich said of trials. “If you don’t have some conflict, where people say they disagree and all people want from the defense side is just for them to settle cases, then the balance gets lost, and you start to have weird effects. The prices of cases go up along with all kinds of other undesirable things. We need to get back to a better balance, and I think that’s going to happen.”

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