



## ASKED & ANSWERED

### BARRETT CORNEILLE

Credibility is key in trial, but sometimes it's best just to admit you're doing voir dire in your tennis shoes because you packed for two left feet.

It's a lesson in admitting fault that longtime attorney Barrett Corneille learned the hard way — twice.

"I was out of town once and forgot my dress shoes [for court]. The other time, I packed two left shoes," said the attorney and president of Corneille Law Group LLC, Madison. "As long as you're honest with people, and you're prepared, they don't hold it against you," he said.

After more than 30 years as a civil attorney and more than 200 jury trials in almost every county in Wisconsin, it's not the only tip Corneille has picked up.

"The most important thing in trying cases," he said, "is to be credible and to treat your opponent and the judge with respect."

If it means helping opposing counsel find a document or figure out the DVD player, so be it.

"A lot of people think, 'This is an adversarial system. You shouldn't do that,'" Corneille said. "But I think the jury appreciates it."

And sometimes, he's learned, the best strategy is knowing what not to say, especially when it comes to damages.

"They are what they are," said Corneille, who primarily defends hospitals and health care professionals, but also does insurance defense work. "To nickel and dime the damages in a case that is worth millions, you can lose credibility with a jury if you argue that a family should get a used van instead of a new van. It's ridiculous, but people do it."

— Jessica Stephen

## Madison firm president reveals lessons learned

**Wisconsin Law Journal:** What is the best part of being an attorney?

**Barrett Corneille:** Developing a bond with other lawyers who are your opponents. Nine out of 10 attorneys I've dealt with, I consider friends. I probably wouldn't have thought that when I was younger. That doesn't mean you don't fight tooth and nail, but it's not personal.

**WLJ:** What was your most useful law school course? Why?

**Corneille:** I think my most useful courses were civil procedure and torts, because I had extraordinary characters as professors — Ray Aiken and James Ghiardi — at Marquette.

**WLJ:** What was your least favorite course in law school? Why?

**Corneille:** Probably criminal law, because I knew I wasn't interested in it.

**WLJ:** If you hadn't become a lawyer, what would you have done?

**Corneille:** I wanted to be an oceanographer, but I thought being away from family and being out of the Midwest would be something I wouldn't like. I thought I'd be away too much.

**WLJ:** What profession would you not like to explore?

**Corneille:** Politics. Can't stand it.

**WLJ:** If you could develop one CLE course for credit, what would it be about?

**Corneille:** I would want to discuss tactics, respect and building credibility in the courtroom.

**WLJ:** What do you consider your biggest achievement, so far? Why?

**Corneille:** I don't think in terms of accomplishments. I like the fact that I've been able to work with good, young lawyers at my firm. I like talking to them about their cases and going through the thought process of how best to present their case to a jury. It's a challenge, and everybody has different ideas. Every case is different. It's interesting.

**WLJ:** What trait do you most like in others?

**Corneille:** Honesty, credibility and people who are straightforward. Candor.

**WLJ:** What do you consider to be the most overrated virtue?

**Corneille:** I think, to me, people that are overly dramatic with empathy. I think they should just go out and help people. I don't know that we need all the drama and hand-wringing.

**WLJ:** If you could change one thing about yourself, what would it be?

**Corneille:** I'd like to be smarter, lose weight and have more hair.