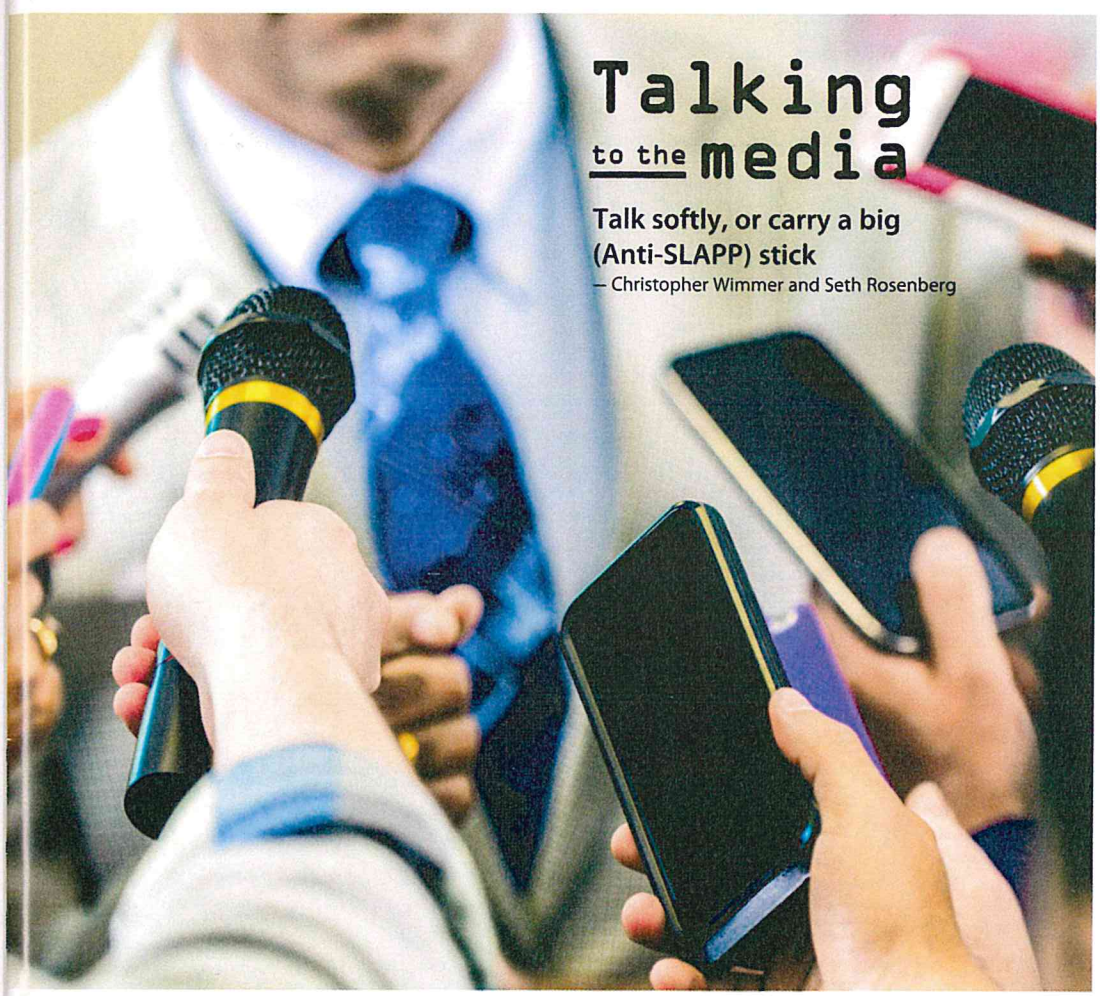
The Magazine for Northern California Plaintiffs' Attorneys

MARCH 2017

Plaintiff



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PROFILE

Claude Wyle
35-year veteran thrives on holding bullies accountable

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Profile: Claude Wyle

35-year veteran thrives on holding bullies accountable while remaining human

By Stephen Ellison

Many have proven to dispel the myths about money-hungry, power-tripping lawyers, and Claude Wyle may well be Exhibit A in that classification. Wyle's genuine compassion and dedication to his clients coupled with his unbridled desire to "make things right" far outweigh any dollar signs on his record.

Wyle was exposed to the lawyer's life at an early age, having been best friends with his now-partner, George Choulos, whose father, Vasilios Choulos, was partners with San Francisco's legendary Melvin Belli. When the elder Choulos advised a young Wyle to go to law school, promising he could one day work at the acclaimed firm, Wyle took it to heart and changed all his college plans to prelaw. He then went to UC Berkeley and studied political economics so he could go to law school.

"It was really a great, glamorous practice, and they were involved with every interesting thing I could think of," Wyle said. "There were always fascinating people around the house, so when Vasilios Choulos said you could come work for me, I jumped at it. It was just a life's decision in a moment."

Since that decision, Wyle and his best friend George Choulos have carried on the legacy of their predecessors, in the process making a name for themselves in the plaintiff's law community. Wyle said his passion for learning has always been the driving force behind his work and has endured the test of time.

The love of learning something new

"I love to continue learning, not just sit there and do what I know and do the same thing over and over again," he said. "In being a plaintiff's lawyer, I find I have to learn new things for just about every case, and I'm going on 35 years now. I'm still constantly learning. Right now, I'm working on some cases involving exploding e-cigarette batteries, and so I have been researching and investigating how lithium ion batteries work."



Wyle

Indeed, whether it's products liability or dangerous premises or some variety of vehicle accident, Wyle goes all in for his clients. Over the years, the firm developed a "focus" on cases involving two-wheel vehicle crashes. Wyle and Choulos both have had a lifelong love of bicycling and motorcycle riding, and while Wyle tries to avoid calling himself a specialist in the area, he said being an avid rider himself provides him with enough knowledge to have the upper hand on most adversaries.

Choulos Choulos & Wyle also sponsors racing teams and supports the Bay Area Riders Forum, which is 60,000 riders strong across the region. They help work on pro-motorcycle legislation, work with lobbyists, and they belong to most bicycle coalitions in the Bay Area. Additionally, they help support safe rides to school and organizations that fix and give bicycles to underprivileged kids.

"I'd say as lawyers we have an advantage over the defense because we ride, and we really understand the dynamics of motorcycle and bicycle crashes – almost as well as the experts we hire," Wyle said. "I know enough to know I'm not an expert. But I understand the dynamics. So when a person comes into our office, often a person who has been rejected by as many as five firms, we can more readily evaluate whether or not they have a good case. We really handle a lot of these cases. We know a lot of the defenses that are going to come up in these cases."

More bike friendly, yet more dangerous

Wyle feels there are a number of variables that have made bicycling around San Francisco more dangerous in the past 20 years, even as it has become more of a bike-friendly city. Among them are a higher number of vehicles on the roads, especially with the injection of ride-hailing drivers from Uber and Lyft; distracted drivers, talking or texting on their phones; and a growing general disdain for bicyclists. The city's efforts toward reducing bicycling deaths and injuries caused by crashes with motor vehicles have been admirable, he said, but more should be done.

"They're making progress," Wyle said. "We have an extremely congested city that has grown in population but within a very small geographic area. … We need more designated cycling areas, where cyclists can be safe and not be subjected to the congestion. Because let's face it, some of the new systems can be confusing to motorists and cyclists. … I think they're moving in the right direction, but I still see a lot of danger for cyclists out there. I'd like to see more safe avenues that are focused on cycling, where cyclists can have fewer encounters with cars. And that means a real infrastructure change."

Jury selection gets tougher

Wyle said bicycling cases are becoming tougher for plaintiffs in San Francisco because the city has trended toward a very anti-bicycling jury pool. Motorcycling has become more popular and less of a stigma, he said, while bicycling has become among drivers and pedestrians less popular. He believes there are a growing number of jurors out there who just don't like bicyclists because either they or someone they're close to was hurt by a cyclist.

"We have people here who hate bicycle riders, absolutely hate them. And they're on the jury," Wyle said. "That's why jury selection

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is everything in a cycling case. It's really become the luck of the draw."

Bay Area from day one

Wyle grew up in Mill Valley, where mountain biking was invented. He attended nearby UC Berkeley for his undergraduate studies and went on to UC Hastings College of the Law in San Francisco.

Upon graduating from law school, Wyle joined the Choulos firm and has been there ever since. At first, his desire to be a lawyer wasn't necessarily about the firm's plaintiff's work; that came later. His initial motivation was stirred by intrigue and curiosity about what he observed as the lawyer's life, and he wanted to be a part of it.

"I wasn't even sure what Choulos and Belli did, other than some of the things I had read in the press and some of the interesting people I saw around," Wyle explained. "Because Choulos at that time did far more than just personal-injury work. I learned later that their practice was primarily plaintiff's work, but they also did a lot of things like copyright work for Alex Haley while he was writing 'Roots' and criminal defense and huge divorce cases. So it was all interesting and fascinating, and their lifestyle was really inspirational."

Taking on 'bullies'

Over the years, that inspiration transformed as Wyle developed into a skilled and shrewd attorney in his own right. The more he saw insurance companies and big corporations taking advantage of their wealth, victimizing "regular" people and generally skirting the law, the more he was motivated to fight back.

"I'm only 5-foot-5, and there have been a lot of people along the way, kind of bullies, and I've always stood up to bullies," Wyle said. "I absolutely abhor bullying. Oftentimes, I am inspired just because the opposition is trying to push my client around, and I feel somebody needs to stand up for them. Ours is a great system that levels the playing field – the civil justice system is a great way to keep bullies in check. I really don't like it when insurance companies or manufacturers or the police take advantage of their power, and I like to even the score."

Wyle did just that for a client whose life basically was destroyed by a fall down a defective staircase. The client was an older woman who worked as a nurse at a psych facility, giving injections to patients. The staircase in question was at her home, and it was literally loose when stepped on, had no handrail and cracked boards, and when the woman fell, she tumbled backwards and shattered her wrist, Wyle said. She had surgery but ended up with a nonunion of the wrist, and it was the hand she used when giving shots at her job. That job had provided her a place to live on the facility, and she also owned a comfort dog that she loved more than anything in her life, Wyle said.

At one point, the dog actually saved her from drowning in her own bathtub. "Because of the broken wrist, she couldn't pull herself out of the bathtub, and she started slipping down under the water and began to drown," Wyle said. "Somehow she was able to call the dog and reached her good hand out of the water and grabbed the dog's collar. The dog pulled her out of the tub and saved her life."

The injury prevented the woman from performing her job and thus she lost her place to live and eventually had to move in with her son, who suffered from post-traumatic stress disorder from his military service. Worse, she had to give up her dog.

"It was heartbreaking to her," Wyle said. "Of all the things that happened to her, she really broke down when she had to give up her dog."

Eventually, the woman became homeless, living in a storage facility. The wrist injury had destroyed her life, Wyle said, and he and his team pursued the case right up to the courthouse steps. The biggest break, he said, was catching the landlord in a lie about the staircase, which had been repaired while the woman was in the hospital. The landlord lied to his insurance company, saying the repaired stairs were how they had always been.

"We got a big enough settlement for her that she was able to get her dog back, move to Texas, buy a house and live comfortably," Wyle said. "She's in her 70's now and still has the dog. This lawsuit turned her life around and really saved her. It really tugs at your heartstrings, and you really feel like you've done good for the community as well as your client when you make someone accountable."

Active and human

When he's not working, Wyle enjoys hiking, running and biking the Marin Headlands. He also loves to travel abroad with his wife and daughter. And recently, Wyle returned to a sport he took up in college: boxing. About five years ago, he joined a boxing gym in Marin City and, along with other members, helped rejuvenate the facility.

"It started off as a very poor gym, but because we have a fantastic coach, some of the more wealthy members have sponsored the coach and the gym, and a new gym has been built," Wyle explained. "It's become a really valuable part of the Marin City community. I'm in there two, three times a week boxing with 23-year-old kids and having a great time, learning a lot and keeping in shape. It's a great sport."

For young lawyers or law students who aspire to a long and successful career similar to his, Wyle had two words: "Remain human." Then he elaborated.

"We're all human beings, so try to have compassion for everyone involved, including the opposition," he said. "Scorched earth rarely works, and it doesn't help you be a happier person. It's OK to be aggressive on your case, and you should be. But with the people you're working with, it pays off to exercise some human kindness, even toward people you may not have much respect for."

Meanwhile, Wyle said he will continue his own kindly approach and isn't even considering retirement.

For better or for worse...

"My wife, when we made our vows, said for better or for worse, but not for lunch," he said. "I love going to work every day, working with my best friend. It's much more than a job – it's real-life stuff. It's my passion; I like to be the hero, I like to help people, and it's rewarding emotionally to champion someone's cause."

Stephen Ellison is a freelance writer based in San Jose. Contact him at ssjellison@aol.com.