



“When I Was a New Lawyer”

Dick Semerdjian
Partner, Schwartz Semerdjian Ballard & Cauley LLP,
San Diego, California
Chair-Elect, Tort Trial & Insurance Practice Section

What is your background, and what inspired you to become a lawyer?

In 1981, I graduated from the University of California San Diego with a double major in biochemistry and cell biology. That same year, I applied to medical school and was placed on waiting lists for three medical schools. During the wait for final acceptance into medical school (which never happened), and while sitting around the beaches of San Diego for the summer, I bought an LSAT study book and took the LSAT on a complete whim. I applied to law school immediately after the LSAT and was accepted to several law schools, so I decided to attend law school first before going to medical school. My goal eventually was to get a joint MD/JD degree. After three years of law school, I was tired of school and broke, so I began my legal career. I never did make it to medical school or obtain a joint MD/JD degree—nor do I remember anything about cell biology or biochemistry. That’s probably a good thing, because I don’t like the sight of blood or labs!



Dick Semerdjian, then and now.



Where did you go to law school, and what did you do right after that?

I attended the University of San Diego School of Law. After graduating in 1985 and passing the California bar exam, I began work for a prestigious law firm in San Diego where I received immediate and significant trial experience and mentoring by excellent trial lawyers. I made partner after six years and practiced with the firm for a total of 12 years. Fifteen years ago, I and two of my partners and one associate from that firm left to start our own law firm, which is now Schwartz Semerdjian Ballard & Cauley LLP.

Do you have any young lawyer experiences that particularly stand out in your memory? If so, what have you learned from them, and how have they helped you to become so successful?

I litigated my first full trial only a few weeks after passing the bar exam. Following the verdict, which was rendered in my favor, I asked the trial judge for some critique on my performance. I explained that it was my first jury trial. The judge was very complimentary of my work and gave me some pointers that have stuck with me ever since. Unknown to me, the judge wrote a letter to the managing partner of the firm indicating his compliments for my trial work and abilities. A group of lawyers and staff at the firm doctored the judge’s original letter, whiting-out his compliments

and replacing them with statements of disbelief and disgust at how such a great and reputable law firm could hire such an unqualified and incompetent associate attorney like me. It was a complete slam on me and my trial performance. The managing partner called me into his office, handed me the doctored letter and asked me to explain. My mind was racing as I read the letter, my eyes were tearing up, and my only thought was to get out of there to avoid a complete emotional breakdown. Just at the peak of my near collapse, the whole firm rushed into the office to yell “April Fools!” The lesson learned: have fun with your office staff, joke around, don’t take yourself too seriously, and make sure you torture your associates. We instill this virtue daily in our practice (and our associates love it).

Whom do you most admire?

My late father, Rev. Shahe Semerdjian, was an emeritus and revered Armenian priest who served the Armenian community and his parish in Los Angeles for more than 50 years until his death at 88 years old. He taught me respect, honesty, integrity, character, and perseverance. He was gentle as a lamb and had a heart of gold. There is not a day when I don’t think of him, and his picture on my desk is a constant reminder of his goodness and inspiration in my life.

What is your greatest source of professional pride?

Watching the great associate lawyers of my law firm succeed in their family life and the practice of law with the same dedication, mindset, ethics, and professionalism as the founding partners envisioned when they started the firm. It is fun to come to work and watch these great lawyers and our office staff “do their thing,” which makes our law firm one of the most distinguished in our city and a great place to work.

What got you involved with the ABA?

I was nominated by the State Bar of California to be the Young Lawyer delegate to the ABA House of

Dick Semerdjian’s Advice for New Lawyers:

- Be professional in all you do.
- Learn from your mistakes and take constructive criticism well.
- Balance your work life and home life.
- Strive at all times for excellence in your profession.
- Have some fun at work and laugh a lot. ♦

Delegates, where I went on to represent the State Bar of California for nine years. During that time, my co-delegate and great friend Jan Mulligan urged me to attend a TIPS meeting at an ABA Midyear Meeting. I stumbled into a TIPS Business Torts Committee meeting, where I met Ginger Busby, Randy Aliment, and David Reif (the only people at that committee meeting). We left the meeting, had lunch together, and the rest is history. I met the right people at the right time.

What was the worst professional advice you ever received?

Be aggressive and scorch the earth when you litigate cases.

What was the best professional advice you ever received?

Always be courteous, friendly, and professional with your opposing counsel. Maintain your integrity and absolute honesty with the judge.

What personality trait has served you best over the years?

My personality, confidence in my abilities, and warmth. I like people. I hug and kiss a lot.

What challenges you the most?

My time restraints: I want to be a good husband and father and spend quality time at home, maintain my case load and bar activities, be responsive to clients' needs, and be able to mentor my associates and give them the time they deserve.

What is the one thing you cannot stand (regarding the law/lawyers)?

Unprofessional and untrustworthy attorneys.

What is your favorite type of legal work?

Trying lawsuits before juries, mediating tough cases, and arguing complex motions before judges.

What would you most like to accomplish as TIPS's chair?

To continue the great comradery and work of TIPS by establishing relevant CLE programming, public service projects, and periodicals; increasing the prestige and scope of TIPS's membership by recruiting significant industry and corporate counsel as new members; and collaborating with the ABA Judicial Division to encourage their participation in our meetings and programs.

What themes will you focus on for 2012–2013?

The 2012–2013 bar year will be TIPS's 80th anniversary. The theme for our year will be "TIPS: Celebrating Our 80th Anniversary of Relevance, Professionalism, Civility, and Excellence in the Profession of Law." I am excited that we are planning a very special spring meeting next May in Washington, D.C., where we will celebrate this anniversary, and join forces with the ABA Judicial Division.

What can the ABA do to be a good home to young lawyers?

Inclusion and open arms: TIPS has always been a leader in welcoming and involving young lawyers to our Section. Once we get them, we need to work hard to keep them by ensuring that young lawyers have key leadership opportunities. I am proud of our efforts in this regard, which are evident in our thoughtful appointments process, the involvement of young lawyers, our law student outreach programs, and the TIPS Leadership Academy. ❖