

**10 YEARS
LATER**

TERROR AND THE LAW



REBUILDING SHATTERED LIVES

\$2 BILLION PRO BONO EFFORT AIDED SURVIVORS

By **DOUGLAS S. MALAN**

Stamford attorney **Ernest F. Teitell** remembers sitting in Bonnie McEaney's home in New Canaan shortly after her husband Eamon was killed in the World Trade Center attacks on 9/11. Suddenly a widow, she found herself alone to raise their four children.

Teitell was beginning his work with Trial Lawyers Care Inc., a pro bono legal program formed to help the families of 9/11 victims recover money from the September 11th Victim Compensation Fund. Teitell, one of the most active Connecticut attorneys in the program, was learning all he could about Eamon, his death and his surviving family to present their case at a hearing.

Bonnie encouraged her children to get involved, Teitell recalled last week.

"We sat on the couch and I heard them tell me their favorite stories about their dad," said Teitell, of **Silver Golub & Teitell**. "One of the little girls wanted to sit on my lap, and she wanted to show me her dad's shirt that she held close to her when she went to sleep. It was very emotional."

Ten years after the historic terrorist attacks, Teitell said his role with Trial Lawyers Care "was the proudest moment of my legal career and as I look back on it, maybe the most significant."

Over the three years that the victims' fund existed, there were 1,092 Trial Lawyers Care volunteer attorneys helping 1,745 clients recover \$2.25 billion from the fund Congress set up to compensate victims'

families. Other attorneys outside of Trial Lawyers Care also recovered money from the fund, which paid out a total of nearly \$7 billion.

Teitell personally handled seven cases and recovered between \$2 million and \$4 million for each family, depending on factors such as the deceased's lifetime earning capacity and the number of children in the family.

"It was a political system coming together, the legal system coming together and lawyers coming together and producing a positive result," Teitell said. "It's not just how we personally felt [about helping victims]. This was being part of an experiment that worked."

Largest Pro Bono Effort

Trial Lawyers Care is believed to be the largest pro bono effort ever undertaken. Another Connecticut trial attorney, Richard A. Bieder, was at the center of its formation.

The idea was hatched by some of the leaders of the American Trial Lawyers Association at the time and Bieder was at the top of their list for inclusion.

"I was told, 'You'll have a chance to do something you've never done before in your life,'" Bieder said last week from his office at Koskoff, Koskoff & Bieder in Bridgeport. When there were first responders who went into burning buildings to try to rescue people, "the least we could do is offer our legal services," Bieder said.

Bieder helped recruit hundreds of lawyers, including Teitell, and educate them



Law Tribune File Photo

Stamford attorney Ernest F. Teitell helped seven families who lost loved ones in the terrorist attacks to receive \$2 million to \$4 million each from a compensation fund.

about how to represent the victims' families' interests during hearings in New York before Kenneth R. Feinberg, a Boston-area attorney who was appointed special master of the victims' fund.

Part of the education process was a 300-page handbook that Bieder wrote. He also helped produce DVD tutorials and run training sessions around the country for volunteer attorneys.

"It was amazing that we put this together so quickly," said Bieder, who remembers the weeks of 16- to 20-hour workdays to get the program off the ground. "It was an incred-

ible experience.”

Bieder and Teitell personally met with several families in Connecticut to understand their lives and the impact of spouses’ deaths.

“We were like therapy for them,” Bieder said. “They were completely impressed that we were doing [the work] for nothing.”

Part of the counseling included legal strategy. Feinberg developed the regulations that governed the victims’ fund and determined how much money each family would receive.

“A lot of family members didn’t want to go through a hearing, but they just wanted to make sure their kids’ college educations were paid for,” Bieder said. “If part of their healing process was to avoid a hearing, then I’d tell them the presumed amount of money they could expect to receive.”

In other cases, Bieder helped families present at the hearings to recover more than the presumed amount. In all, Bieder

handled 19 cases and recovered \$48 million for clients.

Personal Connections

Those clients often called Bieder and other attorneys to let them know when remains of their loved ones’ bodies were recovered at Ground Zero. Bieder said it was a powerful feeling “to know you encouraged enough confidence in your work that they wanted to share such personal experiences.”

He added, “We still get calls from some of the clients we helped. They send us notices of marriage. Some were pregnant at the time of the attacks and we get pictures of kids.”

The work of Trial Lawyers Care lives on in a documentary called “Out of the Ashes: 9/11,” which was produced, written and co-directed by Seattle University law professor Marilyn J. Berger.

Bieder is featured in the film discussing

Trial Lawyers Care, its formation and its impact.

On Tuesday, Sept. 13, Quinnipiac University’s law school will screen the documentary at 5 p.m. in the Grand Courtroom followed by a panel discussion in which Bieder will participate.

Bieder hopes the film is a teaching point for law school students and young lawyers to get involved in pro bono work.

“It was a great part of my life,” Bieder said. “You knew you were doing more than just getting money for those families.”

Teitell said his involvement with Trial Lawyers Care taught him a great deal about understanding a family’s grief and despair following a tragedy, and those lessons help him in other plaintiffs’ cases he handles.

“The opportunity to meet so many wonderful people was remarkable,” Teitell said of the victims’ family members. “I’m grateful to have been part of it. These folks became part of me.” ■