

Champion of Justice Award: Sandra Ribera Speed

By Deborah Chang

Tenaciousness is a personality trait that has served Sandra Ribera Speed well throughout her legal career.

It started at the beginning, right after taking the Bar examination in 2005 and while on a plane to Hawaii. While flipping through a *Rolling Stone* magazine, Sandra read an article about the Notorious B.I.G. wrongful death case stemming from the rapper's murder that occurred in Los Angeles in 1997. The article featured a story about the lead attorney, Perry Sanders of Colorado Springs, and a mistrial that had been declared because the LAPD had hidden some documents. LAPD was ordered to pay more than a million dollars in sanctions.

Sandra was riveted and a light went off in her head. "This is why I went to law school and I am perfect for this case," she thought because of her longtime love of hip hop music. She called Perry Sanders and somehow got through to him. "You really need me on this case," she told him. "I know everything about hip hop and Notorious B.I.G. and the whole east coast - west coast rivalry." Sanders talked to her politely about the case, thanked her for her call and enthusiasm, and hung up the phone thinking he would never hear from the young lawyer again. He was never more wrong.

What he did not know was that Sandra was the daughter of the former police chief of the City and County of San Francisco, Tony Ribera, who taught her the importance of tenacity and perseverance. Sandra dutifully called Sanders once a week for a year. After a year, Sanders threw in the towel and hired her to work on the trial team. It didn't matter that she was the only woman or the youngest attorney on the team who had to pay her dues. What mattered was that she got on the team. "I learned to never take no for an answer,"



"I want to be a part of the solution instead of standing back on the sidelines."

Sandra stated. "You should always try because you never know what's going to happen."

That important life lesson guided her career again five years later, when a case that would literally change her life landed on her desk at a prominent personal injury firm in San Francisco. The case involved a runaway FedEx truck that had crashed into a vehicle driven by a family visiting from the east coast. Sandra wrote a fifty-page mediation brief setting out her clients' losses, but neither the brief nor Sandra got much attention from defense counsel. "The offer was measly, and the mediation went nowhere," Sandra recalls.

Undaunted, Sandra amended her complaint to add punitive damages. Although the trial court initially issued a tentative denying her motion to amend, the judge changed his mind after hearing Sandra argue passionately for 45 minutes. Her happiness over this victory, however, was short-lived. She soon found out that her law firm wanted nothing to do with pursuing what portended to be a drawn out litigious battle involving punitive damages against an international giant like FedEx and its army of attorneys. Sandra, though, knew the case had merit and refused to give up.

She bought out her firm's interest in the case and decided to finance the case all by herself by using all of her savings and applying for and using credit cards. For the next six months, she worked on the case around the clock against a team of seven defense lawyers from a top defense firm. She took over twenty depositions and successfully opposed a motion for summary judgment. She wrote oppositions to 38 motions in limine and proved that she was willing to go the distance. Finally, the defense relented on the first day of trial and settled the case for an amount that made her clients happy. And her gamble had paid off: her portion of the settlement allowed her to open up her own law firm.

Sandra's new firm got a big client one month after it began, coincidentally, from the same source that had led her to Perry Sanders and the Notorious B.I.G. case. The writer of that *Rolling Stones* article, Randall Sullivan, was writing a book on Michael Jackson and learned that Katherine Jackson was looking to replace her probate counsel. He called Perry Sanders and Perry Sanders later called Sandra as his California counsel. For the past four years, Sandra has been one of Katherine Jackson's most trusted lawyers and was on

the team that brought and tried the Michael Jackson wrongful death case.

Her San Francisco law firm, Ribera Law Firm, now has three attorneys and a paralegal, and handles big and small personal injury and employment cases. The last year has brought on many changes for her, as she got married, had a baby girl, bought a house, and moved her firm into a new building. "It's challenging, but at the end of the day, it's all worth it," Sandra claims. Her firm is now suing the San Francisco porn giant, Kink.com, for having an unsafe working environment for porn stars who have contracted HIV in the workplace. "These aren't easy cases," she acknowledges, "but there's always a way."

This attitude does not surprise Perry Sanders. "If Sandy believes an injustice has been committed, she will stop at nothing to help right the wrong," he stated.

Sandra's commitment has also extended to serving on the San Francisco Trial Lawyers Association's Board of Directors and being a part of this year's CAOC's Leadership Academy. While at the Academy, Sandra decided to join the President's Club. "I wanted to step up and get involved in the CAOC and become a President's Club member because I wanted to be a part of the solution instead of standing back on the sidelines," she stated. "If you are an attorney and care about plaintiff's work, you have to be a part of something bigger than yourself. We are all working together to make the lives of our clients and our practices better."

It is this dedication and tenaciousness that makes Sandra Ribera Speed this month's Champion of Justice. According to Sandra, "the great thing about being a plaintiff's lawyer is that you are never alone. There is always someone who will step in and help you – and then it's your turn to step in and help. We are all in this together." ■

CAOC Champions of Justice

What is a champion? According to the dictionary, a champion is defined as "a person who fights or argues for a cause or on behalf of someone else." How fitting, then, that CAOC has created the "Champions of Justice Award" for deserving members selected and honored throughout the year.

The criteria for selection for this award include an attorney's demonstration of extraordinary support or service to CAOC, the legal profession or society at large. Each recipient will be profiled in the *Forum* magazine and/or digitally on our website, and will have use of



the special Champions of Justice logo.

If you are interested in becoming one of our Champions of Justice, or wish to nominate someone for this award, please contact Eric Bailey at ebailey@caoc.org.

We are pleased to introduce in this issue this month's Champion of Justice, Sandra Ribera Speed. ■



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