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The Comeback Kid

How **Don Schweitzer**, new president of the Pasadena Bar Association, rose, fell and rose again

STORY BY // **MERIN MCDONALD** PHOTOGRAPHY BY // **RYUHEI EDO**

IN JANUARY OF 2001, DONALD P. SCHWEITZER WAS RIDING HIGH, HAVING TRANSCENDED HIS ROUGH-AND-TUMBLE CHICAGO ROOTS TO BECOME A CRUSADING DEPUTY DISTRICT ATTORNEY IN ORANGE COUNTY. A CHILD OF DIVORCE, HE TOOK PRIDE IN GOING AFTER DEADBEAT DADS, BECOMING THE FIRST O.C. PROSECUTOR TO SEEK CRIMINAL CHARGES FOR CHILD SUPPORT VIOLATIONS. BUT WHILE SCHWEITZER'S PROFESSIONAL LIFE WAS AT A PEAK, HIS PERSONAL LIFE WAS A DISASTER. HIS MARRIAGE HAD CRUMBLLED AND HE WAS EMBROILED IN A BITTER CUSTODY BATTLE WITH HIS ESTRANGED WIFE. THINGS REACHED A DRAMATIC BREAKING POINT DURING AN ALTERCATION WITH HIS WIFE'S NEW BOYFRIEND, AND SCHWEITZER ENDED UP WITH A MISDEMEANOR ASSAULT CHARGE.

It looked like Schweitzer had nuked his own future. But fast-forward to 2013, and the Southwestern University law school graduate is the most prolific family law and divorce attorney in Pasadena, head of a prestigious firm and a guy who's mounting a challenge to the go-to family-law firms on Los Angeles' Westside. He's also the new President of the Pasadena Bar Association.

How did he pull it all off? For Schweitzer, now 54, personal crisis was masquerading as a new beginning—although it certainly didn't look like it at the time. It took more than a decade for the disgraced prosecutor to get back on track: remarrying, re-establishing his legal career, and bringing something entirely different to the conservative culture of Pasadena law firms.

"It's a rarity to find someone willing to devote so much time and

energy to a non-profit," says Steven Yee, a previous PBA President himself who recommended Schweitzer for the job. "Don brings an unparalleled amount of passion and commitment to it."

Not a bad run for someone who entered the Pasadena legal scene as a complete outsider, looking only for a place where he could put his Orange County years in the rear view mirror. "In 2003, I didn't have a single friend here," Schweitzer says. "There was kind of an 'old boy' network, and when I started going to bar functions it was very intimidating. The one thing I did believe in was my skills. I knew that I could walk in the courtroom anywhere and try a case."

His reputation now precedes him. You might not be a client (yet) but if you're a lawyer or work in the field, you've seen him at a PBA event, or lunching at The

University Club, or coaching a speech class at Maranatha, where both of his daughters (he also has a son) attended high school. Or maybe you recognize him from his television appearances on CNN, MSNBC or Fox News, where

he occasionally provides commentary alongside the likes of Jeff Scarborough, Nancy Grace and even the formidable Bill O'Reilly. Or you might just know him as the friendly guy in the silver Infiniti, who always takes the time to smile and say hello when he pulls into the courthouse parking structure.

"I make an effort to get to know everyone and treat all levels of court employees with respect," Schweitzer says as he waves to a familiar parking attendant at the Pasadena Courthouse on a sunny June morning. "A lot of arrogance



ROUNDTABLE. Schweitzer leads a meeting.

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HAVING A BALL. Schweitzer with his wife, Maria, and a friend, Mike Helton.



and entitlement can come with becoming a trial attorney. Everyone who works in my firm knows that I won't stand for that, and you quickly learn how treating people respectfully helps you get where you need to be on time."

As he clears the metal detectors and shuffles through the crowd of attorneys, defendants and petty traffic violators congesting the brownish beige hallway, a chorus of "Hey Don!" greets Schweitzer as he makes his way to the elevators. One voice stands out from the commotion. "Dooooonnn Schweitzer!" a woman exclaims, sidling up to him. "You haven't called me back."

A bit of friendly deflective banter ensues, the universal "call me" sign is flashed, and the elevator

doors open just in time to provide a convenient escape. "That kind of gives you an idea of what it's like around here," Schweitzer exhales as the elevator starts its ascent.

When Schweitzer was starting his comeback, he worked out of a tiny Pasadena office with nothing but an ad in the Yellow Pages, the equivalent of a lawyer hanging out a shingle to see if he could somehow attract business. Now his firm has 21 employees, 180 clients at any given moment, and occupies half a floor on Lake Avenue. His office is a bit larger now, but one thing still stands out.

A large portrait of Abraham Lincoln is mounted on the wall, and a quick glance around confirms that Schweitzer is a big fan of the country lawyer from his



LEADERSHIP MATERIAL. Schweitzer with Mayor Bill Bogaard and Foothill Unity Center's Betty McWilliams.

native Illinois who saw the nation through the Civil War. There's a Lincoln biography next to a copy of the *Family Code* on his bookshelf, alongside Civil War history books and even a bobblehead likeness of the 16th President.

"Lincoln really is the epitome of what's good in this country. He's the one lawyer that every lawyer should look to," Schweitzer says. "This man was thrust into the most challenging period of American history, in the midst of all of his personal issues, and he kept it together. It just shows you as human beings what we can aspire to be, because none of our lives are perfect. You can make great things happen in spite of the tremendous pressures that life puts on us. Lincoln was trying to keep the union together and trying to keep his family together — that's strength."

Schweitzer needed strength growing up in the Chicago suburb of Glendale Heights, in a tough neighborhood, where as the middle of six children of divorced parents he frequently found himself in trouble. "I was an underperformer, to say the least. It wasn't until high school that things started clicking for me," he recalls.

At Glenbard North High School, Schweitzer discovered a

passion for wrestling and found a mentor in his coach, Bob Fulk. "I ran a pretty tight program," Fulk, now retired and living in Florida, says. "You had to be pretty tough, put a lot of extra time in, and be very dedicated, and Don was one of the hardest working athletes I ever had."

For Schweitzer, who received little support from his own parents, Fulk became a substitute father. "Those were probably the biggest lessons I learned as a youth, and so as my adult life progressed I had a certain ability to take on risk," Schweitzer says of his time in Fulk's wrestling program.

After graduating high school, Schweitzer enlisted in the army, where he served as a military police officer for three years. He returned to Chicago and worked a series of dead-end jobs before finally securing a post at his local police department. But he felt pulled toward a different kind of life, and in 1984, Schweitzer left Chicago for California, where he had landed a position with the Santa Ana Police Department. He was named Rookie of the Year, an achievement he recalls today with obvious pride. "I loved chasing bad guys," he beams. In his six years on the force, Schweitzer served as a foot patrol



WINDING PATH. Above: The Santa Ana Police Department's 1984 Rookie of the Year. Right: Newly minted attorney at work.



officer, a member of the SWAT unit and, eventually, the department's Gang Homicide Detective.

He began working closely on investigations with the Orange County District Attorney's office. "I found myself in court on trials and I just fell in love with the inside of a courtroom, and just watching these attorneys do what they did—they were my idols," he says. He was married and had started a family, but he quit the force and enrolled in law school. Three years and two summer clerkships later, he was working as a Deputy District Attorney.

And then it all fell apart the night he let his anger get the better of him. He had no criminal record, so his license to practice law was suspended for two months. The Deputy D.A. wound up working as an associate for a two-lawyer shop in Norwalk.

But a decade can make all the difference. Nowadays, Schweitzer makes good use of his hard-won insights. In a part of the country where the divorce rate is more than 50 percent and the financial stakes are often high, the people who seek him out include high-income executives, everyday soccer

moms and entertainment industry movers and shakers. He counts some Hollywood celebrities among his clients, but you won't get him to name any names.

Whether they are high-profile or run-of-the-mill, clients going through a divorce, Schweitzer says, are all facing the same issues. But he admits celebrity cases can present a bit more of a challenge. "Celebrities sometimes feel like they have special privileges, and that the system is going to treat them differently," he says. "But the courts in L.A. are not enamored by celebrity status. You have a harder time telling these folks, 'This is real life. You have to follow my advice to do what's best for you.'"

This is by all accounts an atypical approach compared with some of the bigger firms on the Westside, where divorce attorneys have a reputation, deserved or not, for putting the whims of high-profile clients before their best interest. "Some of these firms are more than happy to be a part of the craziness," Schweitzer says. "They'll see it as a goldmine and file motions that may not be necessary or geared toward settlement, until the client either goes broke or

the court says enough is enough."

Schweitzer prefers to settle cases as early as possible. He thinks of himself and his associates as counselors as well as legal advisors, and he's not afraid to tell it like it is. Frequently, he'll dissuade clients from filing for divorce at all, encouraging them to first find resolution through counseling.

It's the kind of advice dispensed by someone who has gone through an ugly divorce and lived to tell the tale. It also helps that Schweitzer is happily remarried. He met his current spouse, Maria, on the matchmaking site eHarmony, when he was putting his life back together. She quickly became an emotional anchor and guiding force in Schweitzer's road to recovery, acting as a broker for communications with his ex-wife as well as a sounding board for his new career aspirations. They married in 2003 and within a few months, Maria quit her job in medical sales and joined him at his windowless one-room office in Pasadena, managing the practice.

Coming from there to where he is now has instilled Schweitzer with the habit of professional generosity. He actively mentors

and challenges his employees, another factor that sets his firm apart from the big Westside players. "He kind of believes that you give people the tools they need to succeed, and they either sink or swim," says Kayla Horacek, now a partner but one of the first associate attorneys to join the firm and a former Westside intern. "It's rare that you find first and second year associates going into court, sitting second chair at a trial or even taking depositions, but Don wants to give everyone the opportunity to get their feet wet."

If this all makes Schweitzer sound like a touchy-feely tough-guy with a soft center, don't buy it. The man is something to behold in court, part charmer, part warrior, noted for his well-timed theatrics.

"He's amazing at that," Maria says. "When he gets into court, something happens to him. He gets really fired up and just takes control and gets the job done. It's kind of his stage."

Schweitzer wants the younger generation of attorneys to get used to that stage. Under his leadership, the PBA has significantly expanded its pro-bono work and community outreach programs. His proudest accomplishment to date is the association's Annual Speech Scholarship Contest. Now in its third year, the event gives local high schoolers the opportunity to debate for scholarships before a panel of 150 lawyers and judges. Each year has seen the number of entrants increase, and many schools have introduced new speech programs as a result.

He's come a long way from the dark days of January 2001. For him, a wrestling Hall of Fame plaque, awarded by his high school last year, symbolizes the distance that he's covered. "After my ordeal, I was ashamed to go home. I was a broken man," he says. "Ten years later, when they inducted me, I got to go back as a whole person—the person I used to be. That's what our job is really about—making people feel whole again." 🍷