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—LAW FIRM BUSINESS—

Complex Creativity

Known as eager to try cases, The Veen Firm takes on plaintiffs' work others find too novel.

By Joshua Sebold
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SAN FRANCISCO — The Veen Firm PC is a plaintiffs' shop that prides itself on taking large personal injury, wrongful death, construction defect and product liability cases that other firms turn down as being too novel or complex.

The firm has evolved over 40 years from a solo shop to a 12-attorney operation split into three trial teams.

William L. Veen found himself staring down the Vietnam War at the age of 25, right after he became a lawyer. He entered officer candidate school for the Coast Guard and was immediately assigned to be a Judge Advocate General's Corps litigator in Hawaii, where he was one of three attorneys assigned to the South Pacific.

Veen said the experience gave him an interest in trial work. After spending about a year at a trial firm to get used to private practice, he set out his own shingle in San Francisco. Veen said the partners at his first firm did not get along well and for some time he didn't think he wanted to be in a partnership.

After about 40 years, he said he's finally found a group of attorneys that are changing his mind. The Veen Firm is not technically a partnership yet, but Veen is in the process of purchasing a building with his three trial team leaders and they expect the structure of the firm to change over time as well.

Veen said the success of the firm and its growth has brought cases from sole practitioners and other plaintiffs' firms looking for additional firepower.

"We get a lot of cases from lawyers who wish to associate with us on cases or refer them," he said.

The firm's four lead attorneys have one major trait in common: They like to try cases.

Two of the trial team leaders, Elinor Leary and Craig M. Peters, used to be deputy public defenders. Leary said the mentality as a plaintiffs' attorney



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From left, attorneys Craig M. Peters, Elinor Leary, Anthony L. Label and firm founder William L. Veen.

who litigates against insurance companies and large corporations is similar to that of a public defender.

"If you're not taking cases to trial, then you're allowing some other entity to decide what the value of your loss is and the same is true if you're a criminal defendant," she said. "In many cases, if you're not taking it to trial, you're letting the state determine the value of your cases. The value of the jury trial can't be overstated."

Peters said by the time someone passes the bar exam, they have invested a lot of time and willpower into the idea of becoming a successful attorney, which can lead to apprehension about handling too many trials, a fear of losing after creating a track record of winning. He said being a deputy public defender was helpful in overcoming that tentativeness.

"There becomes this fear that, 'Well, if I lose a case, that says something about me as an attorney,'" he said. "It actually says more about you as an attorney if you're not going to trial."

The final trial team leader, Anthony L. Label, started down a different path, at a corporate defense firm, now-defunct Thelen Marrin Johnson & Bridges, which was known for its strong construction law practice.

Label said he learned a lot at the firm, but said representing corporate clients was not very fulfilling, which eventually led him to plaintiffs' work.

"At the end of a case, if you've done a good job, you have a client that is hugging you in tears," he said. "That is the highest and best place to be in our profession."

Opponents said The Veen Firm is known for coming up with creative legal theories that make defendants uneasy, driving up the value of settlements. The firm's penchant for trying cases can help too.

"Some law firms are looking to get a settlement without doing a whole lot of work," said Christopher J. Beeman, an attorney at Clapp Moroney Vucinich Beeman Scheley, who has been litigating against Veen and his attorneys for decades. "They're really willing to put time and money into cases where they see an up side."

Beeman said The Veen Firm takes cases others are afraid of because they trust their ability to find interesting legal theories and they leverage the power of their reputation for taking cases to a jury if necessary.

He added that the firm fights hard, but they are also a known quantity to defense attorneys and are known for being trustworthy, another factor that

aids them in making deals with their opponents.

Matthew S. Conant of Lombardi, Loper & Conant LLP, another frequent Veen opponent over the years who has more recently been mediating some of their cases, said the firm seems to follow Teddy Roosevelt's credo of "speak softly and carry a big stick." They are congenial but competitive.

Conant said the firm's place in the plaintiffs' personal injury world is established.

"The Veen Firm is clearly in the top echelon," he said. "You mention them along with the other two or three Grade A firms."

The attorneys have been involved in a variety of lawsuits on topics that have caused recent headlines in the Bay Area. They've handled balcony collapses, litigation about the relationship between Uber Technologies Inc. and its drivers, and a case about the negligent transmission of herpes.

Label's team is currently litigating a case against the city of San Francisco, after a mother was struck and paralyzed by a falling tree branch when she was walking with her children near a popular park.

He contends that the city improperly pruned the trees by "topping" them, cutting off the highest portion of the tree, which he said disrupts the trees' natural growth patterns.

"That makes the lateral branches grow too big to be supported and they start falling out of the sky," he said. "The city is claiming that the trees are all healthy and there is no problem."

Veen never anticipated the firm growing to the size it has but the attorneys he has hired have constantly impressed him and earned larger roles, which is changing the nature of the organization over time.

"I still want to be very much involved. I still want to try cases and do all these other things," Veen said. "But I recognize quality when I see it."