

## Gerry Spence

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Here is some advice for aspiring lawyers, from one of the greatest trial lawyers of our time: "Get out of law school as quickly as possible. You can read every book in the law library and know approximately nothing. Don't go to work for a big corporation or for the government. Go to work for individuals. Your freedom and personal integrity are on the block."

Gerry Spence, who may also be one of the most outspoken lawyers of our time, says this about his own success: "If Gerry Spence, with his humble beginnings, can do it, then I take it that about anybody can do it."

Laramie was the location of Spence's humble beginnings, making UW an obvious choice for higher education. "It was the only university that I knew where it was," he says, and the "only place I could afford to go to. I was a poor boy."

Spence would walk to campus from the railroad yard, where he worked as a brakeman, then to the Connor Hotel, where he was a bellboy on the nightshift. He also worked at the cement plant, shoveling cinders from under the kiln, the noise of which left him half deaf to this day.

So Spence's memories of those years are primarily of work and struggle and rejection. "I was never accepted by any fraternity," he says. "If there was any person who needed to be blessed with social acceptance, it was me. But I wasn't the kind of person who was very socially, let us say, gifted. I wasn't a scholar; I wasn't an athlete; I didn't have much of anything going for me." He did have a love for writing, but one day an English teacher told him he didn't have the talent to do any better than a B, a memory which still haunts him today (having 12 books

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"What makes it powerful is that everyone's there without pay," Spence says. "It's a highly powerful gift when busy lawyers take weeks and months off to help people. It's called the power of love." That's not a word often heard in connection with lawyers and courtrooms, but Spence clearly sees its place there. Often asked which of his



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to his name).

Spence did meet his first wife while at UW, but as far as the University experience itself, he says the best part was getting out. "It's important to understand that it's no discredit to the University," he says. "Quite the contrary. The university was able to absorb the likes of me, to give me a chance. It wouldn't be every school that would make room for me." And the education has served him well. "My education was as good as any that I know of. I've spent a lifetime competing in the courtroom with graduates of the greatest law schools in the land and never found my education lacking."

He chose to go on to law school because he needed to find a way to make a living. "I was fairly articulate. I could use those talents as a teacher or a preacher or a lawyer. My mother wanted me to be a preacher, and that put the kibosh on that. Teachers didn't make any money, and people who didn't make any money weren't successful. That was the philosophy then." That left only one choice.

When he graduated from law school in 1952, he had one child and one on the way. He failed the bar the first time - "the first honors graduate ever to fail the bar." He passed the second time and began

cases meant the most to him, Spence rejects the question. "It's almost like asking which child you love the most," he says. "The cases that I take become like my children. I'm devoted to them."

Aside from his involvement with the College, and his own Jackson-based law firm, Spence, Moriarty and Schuster, and his role as the founder of Lawyers and Advocates for Wyoming, a pro bono law firm that takes on cases of social signifi-

his job search.

"I figured I'd knock on every door until I found a place," he says, which led to a job with a lawyer in Riverton. Six months later, the lawyer was appointed to a judgeship; the firm's clients left because they felt Spence was too young to handle the responsibilities.

"I decided maybe I could get a job as assistant prosecuting attorney," Spence says. "I went to the prosecuting attorney and he just laughed at me. So I decided to run against him. I went to every door in town, on the reservation, on every farm. I'll be damned if I didn't beat him. I became the youngest prosecuting attorney for Fremont County ever, at age 25."

That position helped him acquire the trial skills that became his fame: Spence hasn't lost a criminal trial in his whole life, nor a civil trial since 1969. His renown grew and he became a famous defense attorney, successfully defending large insurance companies from claimants.

Then he "saw the light," an experience that coincided with the dissolution of his marriage and the loss of three cases in a row. "By this time I was 40 years old," he says. "I'd done everything you could do as a trial lawyer. I had a big practice. I had the largest verdicts in the history of the state. I thought I was big-time. I began to take cases against little people. It made me sick. It hurt me. I realized you have a responsibility in using your gifts; it's like a gun placed in your hand."

The day he had this realization, Spence "impetuously" wrote letters to 40 insurance companies and told them they'd have to find other representation. He vowed from then on to represent only "little people."

Much of the rest of the story is history, because it includes some of the largest personal-injury verdicts on the books and some of the

cance plaintiffs can't afford to bring, Spence finds time for his other loves: writing and photography. He's currently finishing a book about a murder case in Oregon. *A Boy's Summer*, a book for boys and their fathers, has just been published, as has *Gerry Spence's Wyoming*, a book of his poetry and his black and white photographs of Wyoming. His first novel is being published this spring; a book called *Seven Steps to Personal Freedom*

most famous names: Karen Silkwood, Imelda Marcos, ("Mrs. Marcos turned out to be a little person too, because she didn't have any money," Spence says.), Randy Weaver. There were many other significant, but less high-profile victories for the "little man" too, such as a \$52 million verdict against McDonald's for a small, family-owned ice cream company and \$40 million for a quadriplegic client whose insurance company refused to pay on his policy.

Spence, who earned an Honorary Doctor of Law degree from UW in 1990, has invested a great deal of his time to filling in the gaps that law school leaves in its graduates, most notably as the founder and director of the non-profit Trial Lawyers College. "Law school is not inadequate; it's silly. Lawyers are never trained in law," he says. "They've never been in courtroom, never looked into the eyes of a widow, never walked through a prison."

The college, which is located on his Dubois ranch, where he's turned his old barn into a dormitory, accepts lawyers "based upon our belief as to their commitment to justice and ordinary people. Not the ones who represent the wealthy or the corporations or the state."

The lessons are based on a process called psychodrama, which teaches students "to be empowered with insight into what's happening between human beings."

It sounds complicated, but the foundation is basic. "The underlying, simplistic thesis is: tell the truth, about your client, about the case," he says. "Everybody else will respond to you in an almost magical way." Spence says that his graduates' whole lives are changed; for one thing, they are unbelievably successful in court and come out beating old time courtroom veterans. The college has now begun accepting judges

will be appear sometime in the fall of 2001. He's also working on a screenplay.

He rises at 5 a.m. to get all these things accomplished and works until his wife, Imaging, calls him for dinner. With a life this full, it's no wonder Spence can't fathom retirement - or golf. "Who wants to play golf?" he wonders. "How empty would your life have to be? I think death would be a better alternative."

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