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Satisfied Customers

Jeffrey Pheffer says the way to build a successful practice is to do good work for clients.

By Skylar Dubelko
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LOS ANGELES — Personal injury attorney Jeffrey Pheffer believes he's his best advertisement.

"My dad gave me this, and I think it's true," Pheffer says, pointing to a plaque in his office. The inscription reads, 'A satisfied customer is my best recommendation, Love Dad,' and when Pheffer turns it over, he notices the tag and chuckles.

It's from "Trophies By Jay in Massapequa," he explained. "He probably gave me this when I just finished law school."

Pheffer first became interested in a legal career at 12 years old. "My uncle said to me, 'You've got a good mouth, you'd make a good lawyer,'" he recalled. "It stuck with me."

After graduating from James Madison University in 1976, however, Pheffer had difficulty getting into law school.

He earned average grades in college, "I applied to schools that were kind of middle to above average, and I got rejected — I had like 30 rejection letters on the wall."

Undeterred, Pheffer continued trying and ultimately was accepted to Western State College of Law.

"I moved from Manhattan to Irvine. It was a big shock," Pheffer recalled. "No bagels, no pizza, no deli food — it was tough. It was 1978, 1979, [and] Orange County was like orange groves."

Pheffer's first job out of law school was working in the Orange County Law Library and clerking for "this lady named Sheila Williams, who was a professor," he said. While working at the law library, he met personal injury attorney James Traut.

"When I met Jim, I got ... the taste of being a plaintiffs' lawyer," Pheffer said. "Didn't have to send a bill, didn't have to keep track of your time, the more money you get the better your result is — it's contingency."

Recalling a conversation he once had with the attorney, Pheffer said, as a young lawyer, he asked Traut if he'd settled any big cases recently.

"He goes, 'No, but I'm settling a lot of little ones,'" Pheffer recounted. "That kind of stuck with me."

In 1986, Pheffer hung out his own shingle, starting Pheffer Law. "Most of the time it's just me, sometimes I'll have a lawyer, sometimes a law student," Pheffer explained.

Today, the firm consists of Pheffer, associate attorney Ye Iris He and support staff.



Skylar Dubelko/Daily Journal

Defense attorney Michael Nebenzahl has worked against Pheffer as opposing counsel.

"Frankly, he's a tough guy for his client, but it's actually very easy to work with him," Nebenzahl said. "That's probably the best compliment you can give anybody."

While many personal injury firms seek out million-dollar catastrophic injury cases, Pheffer prefers working with ordinary people who have suffered serious but not usually crippling, injuries.

"People send me the regular,

Pheffer said, "It's just not my favorite thing to do. ... I hate when I have no control of the outcome."

If Pheffer can't resolve a case through mediation these days, he'll litigate it with another attorney or refer it to another firm.

The attorney recently represented a woman who, while crossing the street, was backed into by a truck. Noting she broke "a couple of ribs" and could have been killed, Pheffer said the defendant's insurance company denied her case, claiming she was at fault for jaywalking.

Steven Kuhn, a neutral who works with Judicate West, mediated the case. While he couldn't speak about it directly, Kuhn, who has known Pheffer "for a long, long time," described him as a very thorough, very prepared and very personable attorney.

"I haven't had a lot of cases with him," Kuhn added, "but I think we've been able to settle everything [we have had]."

In another case, Pheffer represented a man who was injured while playing in a celebrity golf tournament.

"There was an employee of the golf company that was going to deliver beer," Pheffer said.

The employee came around a blind curve and crashed head on into his client's golf cart. His client ultimately had to get surgery. Explaining that he put together an animation of the crash, Pheffer said it took five mediations to settle the case.

"That case I got \$650,000, but their first offer was \$35,000," Pheffer said. "That's another thing that I really like — from where they start to where I finish."

Over the years, Pheffer has learned to pay attention to the signs — both mental and physical — and said, "If you don't listen, you miss a lot of signs."

Knowing a client slept easier, "or they weren't going to snap at their spouse because they're frustrated or hung up on the insurance company," because he took the time to listen to them gives Pheffer piece of mind.

'People say, 'You really helped me find the right doctor, you answered my phone calls, you took care of these problems. That's what I think makes me different.'

uncomplicated soft tissue cases because I never turn it away," Pheffer added. "I do a really good job at it."

Over the years, Pheffer has developed a network of the best doctors and experts. He also doesn't shy away from giving clients his personal cellphone number.

"People say, 'You really helped me find the right doctor, you answered my phone calls, you took care of these problems,'" Pheffer explained. "That's what I think makes me different."

In each case, Pheffer added, "I think of how I would like to be taken care of. ... [Whether] I'm going to get \$5,000 or I'm going to get \$500,000, I'm going to work as hard on both of those cases."

The attorney plays to his strengths. He tried two or three-dozen cases and his results were OK,

In order to win a case like this, Pheffer said one must have a likable plaintiff, put together the evidence and be transparent.

"Then you've got to have luck," he added. Pheffer noted the defense claimed there was a backup alarm on the truck and Pheffer's client simply didn't hear it.

"When I deposed the defendant he goes, 'We don't have a backup alarm in that car,'" Pheffer recalled. "They didn't talk to him, so it made them look pretty stupid."

With the issue of "who's at fault" eliminated, Pheffer was laser focused on seeking the maximum compensation for his client's injury.

"She didn't have surgery, so most guys would have said it's a \$50,000 or \$75,000 case," Pheffer said. It settled right before trial, he added, "I got like \$175,000."