

SUN PROFILE

He keeps on proving juries just love him

Lawyer: Days after settling the \$185 million Merry-Go-Round case, Baltimore attorney Stephen L. Snyder looks to his next big score.

By Scott Shane
SUN STAFF

Looking back, David Levin says, he understands how Stephen L. Snyder won a \$2.8 million verdict for the family of a woman who died after gall-bladder surgery.

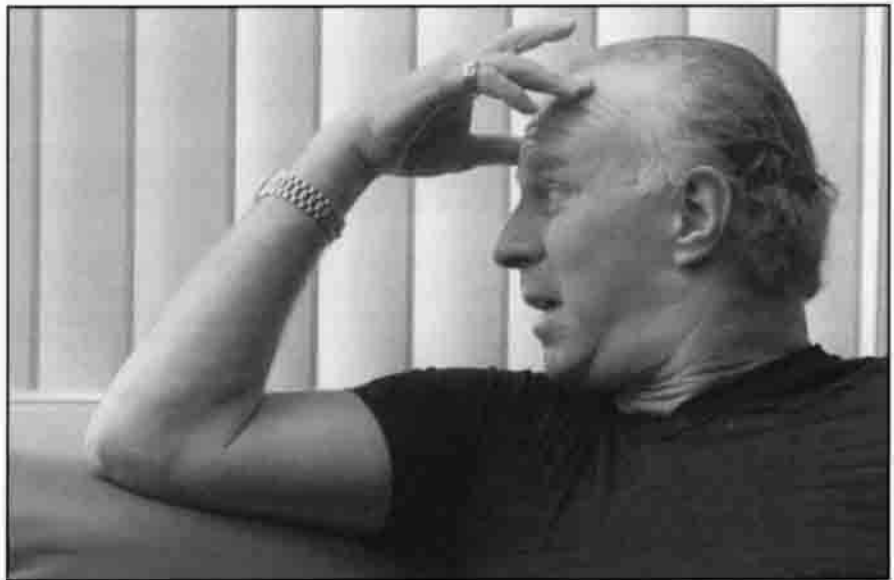
Levin, an Annapolis lawyer, is still certain he beat Snyder on the expert testimony, the medical details, the sometimes tedious scientific evidence. But Snyder triumphed in the hearts of the jurors, and that is the only battlefield that counts.

"There was a heavysset woman in the front row who sold real estate, and she thought Snyder was the cat's meow. Every time Steve opened his mouth, she smiled," Levin says of the 1995 case. "He's like that every time. He connects with two or three people in the jury, and he just doesn't let go."

Lawyers for Ernst & Young took that lesson to heart this week. Rather than face Snyder before a Baltimore jury, the accounting giant agreed to pay an eye-popping \$185 million to settle a lawsuit alleging that Ernst & Young's bungling brought down the Merry-Go-Round clothing chain.

With the exception of the state's \$4.4 billion tobacco deal, it was the largest legal settlement in Maryland history. It was the latest and biggest hit for the 51-year-old Snyder, who will share more than \$70 million in fees.

After Peter G. Angelos, who has earned hundreds of millions suing



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asbestos makers and could make \$1 billion on the tobacco case, Snyder is now indisputably the most successful plaintiff's attorney in Baltimore.

Yet Snyder, the strutting, shouting, weeping, cajoling master of the jury case, seems to have plenty left to prove. In his 30th year as an attorney, he remains strikingly insecure, uncertain of his status in Maryland's clubby legal world.

His style provokes strong opinions, good and bad, often from the same person. Lawyers who know him well call him "a piece of work," "brilliant," "dangerous in front of a jury," "big-hearted," "a control freak" and, curiously, "unhappy."

Most lawyers who have tangled with him consider him a skilled trial attorney with an uncanny feel for what wins over a jury and a savvy negotiator when settlement talks begin. But some begrudge him his

success, describing him as more showman than lawyer, a flashy cynic who manipulates unsophisticated jurors by twisting the facts.

This makes Snyder crazy. His voice pained, he demands: "How many of these big cases do I have to win before people stop saying it's a fluke?"

How many, indeed. Snyder appeared on Maryland's legal map in 1983, with a \$2 million jury verdict against Dr. George Richards, a radiation therapist who overdosed numerous patients. Many of them subsequently brought their cases to Snyder, launching a lucrative business exposing the mistakes of doctors and sometimes lawyers. Among many big awards, he claims the state's largest medical malpractice verdict (\$10.35 million) and legal malpractice verdict (\$12 million).

Moving into business litigation, he settled a racial discrimination and



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His home court: Behind Steve Snyder's public persona, says a longtime friend, "he's actually a very kind, good-hearted person." Snyder, a devoted father, shoots baskets with his children on their backyard court.

fraud complaint against Baltimore's cable television company for \$100 million in cash and stock, receiving as his fee so much stock that he was given a seat on the board. He won two cases against Bell Atlantic, one for \$11 million, the other for more than \$25 million — though on retrial the latter case produced only \$1 million, a footnote Snyder's resume omits.

Even during the preparation for the Merry-Go-Round case, Snyder took time out to win a breast implant suit in Washington. On Jan. 4, a jury awarded \$10 million to the plaintiff, the largest verdict ever in such a case.

Yet for Snyder, characteristically, it wasn't enough. He's certain the award was smaller because the jury took a holiday break.

"The venom that was there had dissipated over Christmas," he says. "It was very unfortunate."

And now there's the colossal payout from the Ernst & Young case, which pitted the scrappy 10-lawyer Pikesville firm of Snyder, Weiner, Weltchek & Vogelstein against old-line, 360-lawyer Piper & Marbury. The \$70 million will be divided with four partners, but Snyder says he gets "the predominant share."

Not that he was struggling. At his not-quite-palatial home off Park Heights Avenue north of the Beltway, complete with swimming pool and tennis-basketball court, he parks a silver 1999 Rolls Royce, a red '97 Ferrari, a silver '98 Mercedes convertible and a '99 Mercedes truck. He has a pent-

house in an exclusive Miami neighborhood and an Ocean City townhouse.

Carefully placed atop the stack of current magazines in his office off Reisterstown Road is an old copy of *Baltimore Magazine* with Snyder on the cover, resplendent in double-breasted suit and spotted tie, illustrating a piece on "Baltimore's best lawyers."

Big risks, big rewards

Yet Snyder is still second to Angelos, and Snyder doesn't like to be second. Both are proud and generous graduates of the University of Baltimore law school. But while Angelos has donated enough to have the John and Frances Angelos Law Center named for his parents, Snyder's more modest donations have created the Stephen L. Snyder Fund for Law Library and Technology.

Second again, which irks Snyder, who suggests that the two lawyers can't really be compared.

"I have the greatest respect for Peter Angelos," Snyder says. "But these guys deal with volume — lots of asbestos cases that are all alike. I like to take the individual case and go for the big hit. The turn-on for me is taking a big risk and getting a big reward."

Snyder attributes his ability to connect with jurors to his modest, middle-class roots. Son of the proprietor of an Eastern Avenue clothing store, Snyder's Quality Shop, he discovered a talent for salesmanship pitching

magazine subscriptions to put himself through law school.

"He was so good at it, after a while he was making more than his father," recalls his mother, Elaine Snyder, 72.

'A regular guy'

"I'm just a regular guy — grew up in a semidetached house, went to public schools," he says. "Invariably, juries take a position on me personally. Rarely is it unfavorable."

That was a revelation to Donald J. Chaikin, a Washington lawyer who assisted Snyder on a 1996 federal lawsuit filed by a travel agent who said he had been squeezed out of business by unfair competition.

"When you go to the federal court in the District of Columbia it's all whis-pers," Chaikin says. "Snyder's a screamer. He walked into that courtroom and took it over like it was a mom-and-pop operation."

The judge was "outraged," Chaikin says. But the jury was not. And the defendants were so shaken they settled for \$3 million just before deliberations were to begin.

Afterward, jurors told Chaikin they never understood the complex testimony on antitrust rules and economic damages.

"But they were going to rule in Snyder's favor anyway," Chaikin says. "They just liked the guy."

Marc Snyder, 27, Snyder's eldest son and a member of his firm, says his father "does the opposite of everything they taught us in law school," beginning by shattering the admonition to "dress conservatively."

Guilty, pleads Snyder, with his Rolex watch, his elephant-skin attache case, his gold chains and gold bracelet with "STEVE" spelled out in tiny diamonds. "I'm very high-profile in my dress. I dress like Steve Snyder, like my personality. It's important to show the jury I'm a successful lawyer."

'Street-smart instincts'

Other lawyers say Snyder's partners, Arnold M. Weiner and Robert J. Weltchek, often have a better command of the facts and the law. But Snyder, his partners say, has a chess grandmaster's ability to think several moves ahead; a gambler's willingness to sink huge money into case preparation; and, above all, an actor's instinct for his audience.

Snyder speaks of the "messages" and "vibes" he gets from jurors, allowing him to connect with them as oblivious defense attorneys plod through their prepared case. He speaks of how he "empowers" juries to award big money: "I go out of my way to tell them, 'It's your call.'"

"I'm very, very good at conveying to a jury what they want to hear," boasts

Snyder. "I have tremendous street-smart instincts."

If strategy requires fury, he will be furious. If strategy indicates tears, he will weep. Of one case, Snyder notes with pride, "One of the appellate issues was, Snyder broke down and cried in front of the jury."

'A very hard lesson'

Defendants who have been blistered by Snyder's scorched-earth cross-examinations don't forget it.

One is Dr. Krystyna Blotny, a pediatrician interrogated by Snyder in a 1996 trial. The jury awarded \$6.2 million to the family of a toddler who died at John Hopkins Bayview Medical Center of severe burns.

Snyder "devastated me, not just as a physician, but as a human being," Blotny says.

"I still have nights that I wake up and hear him shouting at me across the room, 'You and only you, Dr. Blotny, are responsible for killing this child!'" she says. She considered the accusation preposterous; she had not been on duty for many hours before the child died, and believes herself blameless.

"I learned a very hard lesson," Blotny says, near tears. "The entire process was to get money. It was not about the truth."

For Snyder, it was just another day in court.

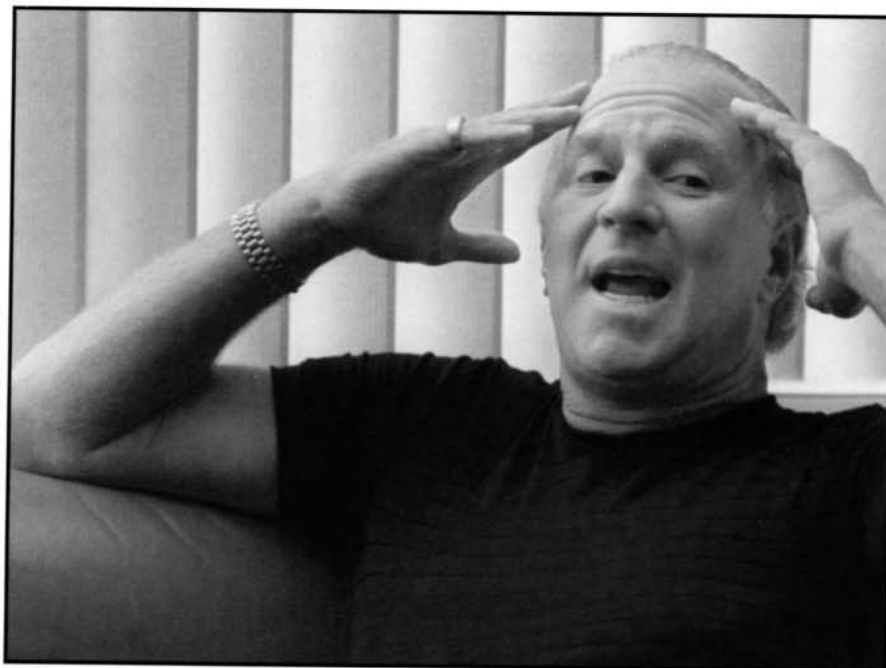
"Blotny? Was that the burn case?" he says. "They take it so personally. I don't. I'm retained to represent a client. If I saw Blotny on the street, I wouldn't have the slightest idea who she was."

Snyder's style draws scorn from some, though by no means all, members of the defense bar.

"He presents a conspiracy and hammers at it," says one lawyer who declined to be named for fear that Snyder could make things tougher for his clients. "Oftentimes the facts don't get in the way. It becomes a personal theatrical battle. In my view, he has an extraordinarily cynical approach to the judicial process."

If he is a formidable courtroom opponent, Snyder can also be a trying colleague, say lawyers who have worked with him. He can fly into a fury at the odor of popcorn or the sight of an associate eating at his desk. He has fired a young attorney in the middle of a trial — and rehired him during the drive back to the office. His ego can suck the air from a room, as hard-working associates listen to him claim credit for shared victories.

Yet when Snyder starts telling war stories, he can be mesmerizing. He piles anecdote upon anecdote, like a waiter trying to carry too many dishes at once. He punctuates his narrative with self-flattery.



DOUG KAPUSTIN : SUN STAFF

A winner: With his Rolex watch, elephant-skin attache case, gold chains and gold bracelet with "STEVE" spelled out in diamonds, Stephen L. Snyder tries "to show the jury I'm a successful lawyer."

"This is a great story," he says, mid-story; or, "To give you an example of how driven I am..." Of one trial tactic he recalls as especially devastating, he shouts: "This is Perry Mason!" he says. "I'm dying! I think this is going to be the score of a lifetime!"

He grows most excited recounting how he undercuts defense experts.

"We wasted them!" he says of the doctors in the breast implant case. "We absolutely destroyed them! They'll never testify again!"

The lawyer who talks this way is not all there is to Steve Snyder, his friends and family insist. He is, by all accounts, a devoted father to his five children; sons 23, 25 and 27 by his first wife, Renae; and a 9-year-old daughter and 6-year-old son by his second wife, Julie.

(For their 10th anniversary, he whisked Julie off to Italy. "We were supposed to meet the pope," he says, but the pope evidently had other plans.)

"Once you get to know him personally and get through the insecurity that is behind his public persona," says Michael Spodak, a forensic psychiatrist and longtime friend, "he's actually a very kind, good-hearted person."

Wary of that "public persona," Snyder refuses to pose for photographs with the Rolls and the Ferrari. Shoot him instead, he suggests, in Julie's family church in East Baltimore, Our Lady of Pompei, where he paid for painting and repairs.

"The interesting story," he says, "is how a Jewish boy paid to have a Catholic church renovated." That's just the beginning of his good works, he hints: "I've always wanted to start a multimillion dollar charitable trust."

Snyder insists he was never the brash bully some portray him as, and these days is more often peacemaker than provocateur. "Now I'm the most respected lawyer in the courtroom," he says. He repeats it several times, as if trying to persuade himself.

'It's never enough'

With the Ernst & Young deal in the bag, congratulatory calls and letters are pouring in. Snyder's family and friends are urging him to rest on his laurels, enjoy life, take the summer off.

"I just wish he'd take a deep breath and relax," Julie says. But she knows him too well. "It's never enough," she says.

And as Steve Snyder talks, it is clear that the glow of the Ernst & Young triumph is beginning to fade. Already, Snyder is plotting his next kill.

"The next case will be a billion-dollar case," he declares.

Which lawsuit does he have in mind for this jackpot?

Well, actually, he admits, he doesn't have the case in hand yet.

"But it's coming," Snyder says, eyes glistening. "And this time, I won't settle it."