



June 2012 Bar Bulletin

Profile / Karen Koehler

'The Velvet Hammer'

By Paul Stritmatter and Catherine Fleming



"The Velvet Hammer" is a perfect moniker for Karen Koehler. Her disarmingly soft touch belies her tough-as-nails representation of wrongful death and catastrophically injured clients.

While raising three daughters (Cristina, Alysha and Noelle), Karen has managed to raise the bar as one of Washington's top trial lawyers. Her Oprah-style trial approach has earned her the recognition of her peers as a Trial Lawyer of the Year by the Washington State Association for Justice (WSAJ).

Most recently, her 1½-year-old blog (KarenKoehlerBlog.com) catapulted to the top of the charts as the American Bar Association's No. 1 Trial Practice blog.

Karen is as technical as she is creative. Her logical German father is a retired UW professor of biological structure. Her intuitive Chinese mother is a retired general practice lawyer. They taught her to be proud of her

mixed race and that it wasn't necessary to fit within a stereotype. As a result, Karen takes delight in challenging trial lawyer "norms."

"You can be serious and do a good job without having to take yourself too seriously," she says. She is on a personal quest to show the general public that "lawyers are real people too." This is what makes her blog so appealing to a large cross section of society.

"We lawyers are our own worst PR enemies," Karen says. "Look at the awful ads on everything from television to taxi cabs. The Internet is clogged with lawyer garbage. Our best hope is to stop adding to the caricature and humanize ourselves."

Karen obliges through her website, blog, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, P'interest, and any other new social network device that her daughters learn and tell her about. She has changed the way the law firm of Stritmatter Kessler Whelan Coluccio (SKWC) portrays itself - from the ads she conceptualizes to the booklets she shepherds through completion.

For the past decade, Karen has been writing trial diaries that reflect her love of courtroom drama and her desire to have fun - from the time she lost a shoe and wore flip flops while cross-examining a witness to the time the entire jury panel, judge, defense counsel and everyone else in the courtroom applauded her witness on a spinning bike. Her stories enthrall as much as they inform.

Justice Steven González admits with a chuckle, "While not in trial, I enjoy reading her blog." About what makes her interesting in the courtroom, he explains, "Karen is not afraid to disagree - whether it's with opposing counsel or with the court. Her arguments are excellent and make a good record effectively."

Another judge who also enjoys Karen's blogs and trial diaries when not presiding over one of her cases is Judge Richard McDermott. "Her trial diaries are a refreshingly candid account," he says. "While self-effacing, they are poignant and accurate. What a great tool she's provided for young lawyers."

In commenting about her as a trial lawyer and her courtroom presence, Judge McDermott says, "Karen is very special. When she's in the courtroom she looks like she wants to be there. Unlike too many attorneys, she's always well prepared."

Judge Mary Yu describes Karen as "an extraordinary trial lawyer; she is intuitive with jurors and creative with her presentation. I truly appreciated her sense of humor, intensity and willingness to experiment with me as we took one of her cases (a jury trial) up to Seattle University School of Law. The one word that comes to mind when I think of Karen is 'courageous.'"

Karen's energy level (she calls it her hyperactivity disorder) has shown no signs of waning over the years. (Does she ever sleep?) And in case you are interested, she is not shy about being "51 years alive."

Karen runs more than an hour every day, usually with her dog Nala. "It's how I meditate," she says. She manages a demanding caseload with SKWC and did so even when she recently served as WSAJ president. She frequently speaks around the country for trial lawyer associations and the American Association for Justice where she is also a board member.

She has been an adjunct professor of trial advocacy at the UW where she has taught for seven years with Bill Bailey. And, in 2010, she started the Female Trial Advocacy Program that offers classes through WSAJ.

In 2011, Karen wanted to make a difference outside of the legal arena. She created (with SKWC's significant support) and now serves as the president of the Spinal Cord Injury Association of Washington (SCIAW.org). SCIAW is a partner of the Christopher and Dana Reeve Foundation.

Karen's daughter Cristina organized SCIAW's first large event, the Green Lake Walk and Roll, which raised over \$11,000. The second Walk and Roll will be October 6 and is expected to be at least twice as big.

Karen's high-profile cases include:

Kime v. City of Seattle: The Kime case is well known by Seattle residents who were around in the early 2000s. Young Kris Kime was trying to help an innocent victim, who was being attacked during the Mardi Gras riots of 2001, when he himself was then beaten to death. Despite Kris's friends pleas to the police, who stood nearby, the officers complied with the mayor's orders to do nothing. Suing the city was a way to hold it accountable for decisions that led to avoidable death and injuries.

Ethel Adams v. Farmers Insurance Company: Michael Testa rammed his girlfriend's truck as he chased her down Aurora Avenue. The truck crossed the centerline where it flipped upside down on top of and head-on into Ethel Adams, almost killing her. Adams' insurance company, Farmers, decided not to pay the claim because road rage was not an "accident."

The public became outraged as media covered the lawsuit. The insurance commissioner threatened to shut Farmers down in Washington, at which point it changed its mind and paid on the policy. Adams then sued Farmers for bad faith. One year after Adams was hurt, the governor signed the "Ethel Adams Bill" into law - when an innocent person is injured in a car accident, the insurance company can no longer play the same word games.

Perez v. "Construction Company": SKWC, through Karen, Paul Stritmatter and Kevin Coluccio, brought a lawsuit on behalf of Candelario Perez and his three dependent children in the Eastern District of Washington in Spokane. In 2008, Perez was tightening barbed wire to a fence post when he fell backwards off a cliff in Eastern Washington, tumbling head over heels down a canyon wall. Perez became an instant quadriplegic.

For a year and a half the SKWC team battled with the general contractor, which had failed to provide any fall-protection safety. SKWC even went with all five of its experts to the cliff with proper safety gear. Exactly two years after Perez's tragic injury, the case settled for \$7 million - the available policy limits.

Both the general and subcontractor are still in business and working together. But there is now a difference. Today, their workers attend regular safety meetings, minutes are kept, fall-protection gear is provided, and there is a fall-protection system in place.

Karen will be the first to say that she's not an island. She is still best friends with her former law partner Pat LePley. She credits the strength of the Stritmatter firm for helping her to blossom these past eight years. She has a picture of her paralegals Anne Roberson and John Meyers front and center on her desk because they "get it all done."

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Her network of extended family and dear friends grounds her. Cristina, her eldest daughter, is on her way to Gonzaga University School of Law. Alysha, a junior at the UW, created and is president of UW Yogis - a 200-member group. Noelle has completed her freshman year and is heading to school in Nashville for a music business degree.

Karen Koehler personifies the new-era trial lawyer. She improves the image of our entire profession, while obtaining significant results for her clients as only "The Velvet Hammer" can.

Paul Stritmatter, a former Trial Lawyer of the Year and Champion of Justice, is a partner at Stritmatter Kessler Whelan Coluccio. Stritmatter's blog, FightSubro.com, is also quickly catching up with Koehler's personal blog in terms of readers. Catherine Fleming is an attorney at SKWC. She contributes regularly to the firm blog at pnwinjurylawadvocate.com.