



Photo by Brandon Sullivan

INDEFATIGABLE

Dev Sethi relentlessly channels his own underdog experience to help plaintiff clients

Published in 2026 Southwest Super Lawyers magazine

By [Nancy Henderson](#) on April 10, 2026

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In the early 2000s, a south Arizona schoolteacher and Vietnam veteran was chaperoning schoolchildren in a 15-passenger Ford van when one of the vehicle's Goodyear Load Range E tires suddenly failed, the driver lost control, and the vehicle rolled. The teacher's right arm was ejected through the shattered-glass window and torn off near her shoulder.

"Goodyear knew, but the public didn't, that these tires were deadly," says Dev Sethi, 53, now a litigator at Schmidt, Sethi & Akmajian in Tucson, who represented the teacher. "Ford had a problem with the stability of these 15-passenger vans. You put the two of them together, and it was a recipe for real disaster."

As the lawsuits piled up against Goodyear for the same tire defect, Sethi says, "They would insist on these secrecy orders in every case. They would give up documents in individual cases, but then they would compel each plaintiff's lawyer to keep that information secret and hide it from other similarly situated injured parties. So our judge here in Tucson allowed me a sharing order, so I could share all the documents that we got with any other victim of these tires."

Sethi settled for a confidential amount, and the sharing provision benefitted dozens of plaintiffs nationwide. "Tucson and our case became ground zero. We became kind of a center spoke in this huge wheel of injured people around the country," he says. "That really inspired my love of the work and convinced me that one of the most important things that you can do as a plaintiff lawyer is be generous with information, collaborate and work together toward the benefit of our clients."

Since then, he has focused on personal injury, products liability and medical malpractice, frequently achieving seven-figure settlements and/or litigating jury verdicts stemming from vehicle accidents; school sexual assaults; and negligence of senior care facilities in fatal wandering cases. Many times, he has served as a victim advocate for civil clients in their criminal cases, attending hearings, communicating with both sides, and "standing shoulder to shoulder with them through the entire criminal process."

"What motivated me was telling people's stories," he says. "I wanted to work as a trial lawyer and in litigation. I found that exciting. I'm very curious about people's lives. I like to know what they like to spend time doing. I like to know what interests them. In every litigation case, it's all about stories, and I think I'm pretty good at making those stories interesting and compelling and something you want to listen to and learn more about."

Carefully weighing his words as he speaks, Sethi comes across as caring and even-keeled. But that doesn't stop him from being "aggressively conversational" in front of a jury and judge. "When I was a defense lawyer, the cases that concerned me the most were the cases where the lawyers on the other side were relentless. They left no stone unturned," he says. "I want to be as creative and innovative in pushing my clients' cases to make sure that they are protected and get the full measure of justice that they're entitled to. And sometimes that requires being relentless."

Tempe attorney Bradley Biggs has witnessed this trait more than once since his first battle against Sethi in a wrongful death case. "Dev was always professional and respectful, but pushed the case at a very aggressive pace," Biggs says. "I recall at one point he was pushing the case so hard that I emailed him a single word, 'despacito,' after the popular Justin Bieber song at the time, which means 'slowly.' Dev's immediate response was 'rapido.'"



Much of Sethi's drive comes from being an outsider. Born to immigrant parents in Asheville, North Carolina, he was frequently bullied. "It was tough. At the time, I was the only Indian kid in any school that I ever went to," he recalls. "Many lawyers have these experiences of being bullied or being treated, or at least perceived, unfairly as kids. That stokes a fire, and we want to find fairness and equality and justice and protect people as we grow up. I think that's part of what informed what I became and why I do the kind of work that I do."

Thanks to the Duke University undergrad classes that introduced him to the rule of law, and the support of his parents, who he says, "inspired me to believe that I could do whatever I set my mind to," he decided to go to law school.

"I had never met a lawyer. I didn't know any lawyers, wasn't friends with any lawyers, certainly no Indian lawyer. And I had never seen anybody in law that looked like me," Sethi says.

After graduating from the University of Arizona College of Law in 1997, Sethi joined the Las Vegas arm of Phoenix-based defense firm Broening Oberg Woods Wilson & Cass. "There was no law school in Las Vegas at the time, and the legal community there was kind of still developing," he says. "It was underserved in a lot of ways. There was a ton of work to do and I had an opportunity to do all sorts of stuff very, very early in my career that I don't think I would've had in a lot of other markets."

His main client was Hard Rock Hotel & Casino, which, for a 20-something attorney, offered the perfect setting to spread his newfound legal wings. "I got to meet all the casino managers and pit bosses, and got to know all of them as a first-year lawyer, which had a lot of fun benefits because I always got a great table and I'd always park my car right out front of the casino."

One weekend in 1998, while visiting his future wife Olivia in Tucson—she was still in law school, where they met—Sethi was having lunch at the popular Sausage Deli when he ran into Peter Akmajian, who asked, “Would you ever want to come back here? I need an associate.”

Sethi joined Akmajian at O’Connor Cavanagh until the firm closed, then joined another defense firm, Chandler Tullar, Udall & Redhair until “the greatest opportunity of my life came up,” in 2001. Sethi got a call from Ted Schmidt, a lawyer he idolized who’d left O’Connor Cavanagh to start his own firm with several others. Would Sethi consider coming to work with them?

“That’s the single best professional decision I ever made,” Sethi says. “The minute I came over to the plaintiff side, I felt at home. I felt pulled into it. I felt like I couldn’t get away from it, and I didn’t want to get away from it. I was working exceptionally long hours and loving every single minute of it. I would go to work early in the morning. I’d come home, have dinner with my wife and then go back to work until early in the morning. I loved it, and I felt like I was making a difference.”

The transition posed its own challenges. “Being a plaintiff’s lawyer is a lot harder than being a defense lawyer,” he says. “It’s like digging in the dirt. There’s always more dirt to move out. We have to build the burden of proof, and we have to do the very, very hard work of being present with our clients in a very emotionally difficult and fragile time.”

According to his law partner of 25 years, Sethi does just that. “Brilliant, creative, extremely persuasive and relentless,” is how Schmidt describes his colleague. “He is an engaging, thoughtful and hardworking attorney who always puts the interests of his clients and partners first.”

Fueling that hard work is a rare level of tirelessness, which Sethi attributes to his dad, a heart surgeon. “He would be up and working in the most difficult situation you could imagine, early and late, and early and late again, and I never heard him say one time that he was tired. I’m trying to live up to that, I guess.

“I have the ability to go a long, long time without getting tired or without breaking,” he adds. “I think I’ve just convinced myself that I can work harder and be more dogged than the next guy. I believe that life is really a lot about poise. If you can keep your wits about you and keep your head straight for longer than the person next to you, you will come out ahead.”

One of Sethi’s most memorable trials involved retired Marine Calvin Beatty who arrived at Oro Valley Hospital emergency room with painful kidney stones shortly before Christmas of 2007. Hospital staff administered morphine and discharged him around 2:30 a.m., before his wife could get there to pick him up. Beatty walked out of the facility alone, crossed the street and, believing he was stepping over a guardrail, fell about 20 feet from a bridge and into a dry wash, cracking his spine and becoming a paraplegic.

The pretrial offer was a mere \$50,000. “The defense never took that case seriously,” says Sethi. A Pima County jury thought otherwise in 2011, finding the hospital 100% at fault. Subsequently,

the case settled for \$5 million.

Recently, Sethi represented a client who hailed an Uber at Tucson International Airport on her return from a business trip in early 2025. Soon after pulling away, the driver ran a stop sign, and an oncoming car smashed into the passenger side, leaving the woman with numerous bone fractures, a punctured lung, a bruised heart, and internal bleeding from a liver laceration.

“During what was undoubtedly a very challenging emotional and physical recovery for me, Dev proved to be an invaluable support,” says Kaye R. “He carefully helped me navigate through the legal landscape, making certain that I understood all my options. He called on me quite regularly, and visited my home during the recovery, to keep me updated on discussions and discoveries.”

Sethi resolved the case against the rideshare and, says Kaye, gave her “the freedom to fully focus on my healing. While the breadth of his knowledge and experience was quite impressive, it was also Dev’s genuine care and empathy that made a significant difference to my experience. Dev continues to occasionally follow up with me to inquire about my health and wellbeing.”

Sethi has represented a number of bicyclists who were severely injured by motorists, along with the families of those who did not survive. He was introduced to the community by Brendan Lyons, a former firefighter and cyclist who founded the nonprofit organization Look! Save a Life in 2012 after a distracted driver ran into him. “Unfortunately, we have a lot of car-bicycle collisions,” Sethi notes. In 2015, he negotiated the then-largest single personal injury settlement ever paid by the city of Tucson—\$1.8 million—when a garbage truck driver made a right turn and crashed into a cyclist.

In one wrongful death case, Sethi sued a roofing company when one of its drivers plowed into a group of out-of-town cyclists who were stopped at a red light in the Catalina Foothills, killing two people, including Sethi’s 68-year-old client, and injuring a third. “Not only was [the driver] intoxicated, but the day he got hired, he failed his drug test, and then the supervisor at the roofing company told him to go to a different lab, where he passed the drug test,” Sethi explains. “And then they gave him the keys to this truck and, sure enough, a couple of months later, he was high on methamphetamines and ran into these folks, killing them.”

Sethi’s tenacity prevailed. The company settled for \$5.2 million the night before the defendant was sentenced to 10 1/2 years in prison.



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In addition to handling such high-dollar cases, Sethi’s pro bono work concentrates on those facing an uphill climb with no big payoff in sight. “We focus on just giving folks some peace of mind, even if it’s not a record-setting resolution, because our law firm is really committed to the idea of using our skills and our resources and our experience to stand up and help folks in their time of need. It’s something that makes me so proud of what it is that we do, and it makes me so happy to go to work every day.”

Sethi also volunteers with a number of community organizations, particularly those that support education and better lives for children—such as Angel Charity for Children, which in 2025 funded projects ranging from pajamas for kids facing abuse, neglect or trauma to discounted museum field trips for youth from low-income and Title I schools. He also serves on, among others, the board of the University of Arizona Foundation and the philanthropic board of Salpointe Catholic High School, which his children Sophia and Bodhi attended.

Sethi is currently trying to figure out what empty-nesting looks like, he says, with Sophia now earning a master’s degree in public health at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and Bodhi in his second year at the University of Arizona. “I took a wreath-making class,” Sethi says. “That didn’t stick, but ... I’m open to suggestions.”

His law work continues to bring meaning to his life. “I have always believed that being a lawyer is a great honor,” he says “What you’re learning to do is solve a problem. You get this tool kit

that allows you to meet people, and they come to you often on their worst day and they say, 'This is the biggest problem I've ever faced. Can you help me with it?' That kind of interpersonal relationship with my clients and being able to tell stories—that's something I always wanted.

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