

APRIL 7, 2010 | LITIGATION

Fighting For the 'Little Guy'

Plaintiffs' Attorney Likens His Work to Injustice Suffered By His Armenian Ancestors

By Catherine Ho

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LOS ANGELES - Whether it was negotiating for a new toy or sweet-talking his parents for candy, Garo Mardirossian always knew how to get his way.

"I was very vocal," he said of his childhood. "My relatives would say, 'You talk too much. You've got to be a lawyer.'"



His knack for talking served him well in a short stint as a car salesman, but perhaps most during his nearly 30 years as a trial lawyer, persuading juries to award multimillion-dollar verdicts to clients in auto crashes and other personal injury and products liability litigation.

Mardirossian, the 2010 president of the Consumer Attorneys Association of Los Angeles, prides himself as the first "foreigner" to take the helm of the 61-year-old trial lawyers group. He hopes to continue the group's efforts countering tort reforms, as well as fighting court budget cuts during his one-year term.

"I'm honored," he said. "For my grandparents to have their grandson be the head of such an important organization, it would have been a dream."

Mardirossian's grandparents were survivors of the Armenian genocide. His grandfather changed his name from Kotanian to Mardirossian - which means "son of a martyr" in Armenian, to honor his parents and siblings who died during the massacre.

Mardirossian, 54, says he sees parallels between his work at CAALA and the injustice his ancestors suffered nearly a century ago.

"What my grandparents lost by way of their siblings and parents and, to a lesser degree, the property they had to leave behind when they were uprooted... is a crime and intentional tort of major proportions that still has not been resolved," he said.

Born in Syria, Mardirossian moved with his parents and three sisters to Cleveland when he was 11. Less than a year later, they packed up and moved west to Whittier where, for two years, they lived in a church-owned house for low-income families on Imperial Highway. They dubbed the

house "Hotel Rose" because of how often his mother Rose would take in relatives recently relocated to Southern California.

In the decades since, Mardirossian and his three sisters - a doctor, a chemist and a nurse - have all stayed within a 40-mile radius of their parents' home in Los Angeles. Mardirossian lives in Pacific Palisades with his wife Kathy, an attorney, their 10-year-old son Kevin and their German shorthaired pointer, Baron, named after Clippers' star Baron Davis. Their daughters Ani, 21, and Nora, 19, attend UCLA and UC Santa Barbara, respectively.

Mardirossian graduated from UCLA and Whittier School of Law. In 1989, he bought the building near Wilshire Boulevard and Fairfax Avenue that houses his plaintiffs-only tort litigation practice, Mardirossian & Associates. The five-lawyer firm has carved a place for itself in the landscape of Los Angeles plaintiffs' firms, many of which are far larger in manpower.

"He's not as big as some of the other firms with 25 to 30 attorneys," said Stephen Roberson, a partner at Roberson Kimball & Jaltorossian in Newbury Park, who has opposed Mardirossian in several cases. "But in terms of being a trial lawyer... I've had cases against the big firms, and I'd put Garo in the top of the crowd."

Roberson represented the defendant in a 1997 trial, *Lytle v. Riviera Country Club* that Mardirossian tried to a \$3.6 million jury verdict.

Mardirossian represented Theodore Lytle, an antitrust lawyer who was golfing at the country club when a club employee drove into him with a bulldozer, leaving a quarter-inch cut in the back of his head. He sued the club for negligence, claiming permanent brain injury.

Mardirossian was a consummate professional throughout the grueling trial - even sending Roberson flowers after he had emergency hernia surgery in the middle of trial, Roberson said.

"He's a tenacious attorney but a gentlemen," Roberson said.

One of Mardirossian's more high-profile wins came after a 1995 jury trial in *Dole v. County of Los Angeles*, a civil rights case involving allegations that Los Angeles County sheriff's deputies brutally raided and attacked dozens of people attending a bridal shower hosted by a Samoan American family. The case, which stemmed from a 1989 incident in Cerritos, ended in a \$24 million verdict against the sheriff's department, one of the largest civil rights verdicts in U.S. history. Mardirossian represented the 36 plaintiffs, including several members of the Dole family, who were injured during the raid.

Similarly, CAALA represents the voice of the "little guy," opposing corporate interests that throw up roadblocks to progress, he said.

"We are the voice of the people who can't speak as loudly as we can and who can't convince our legislators as well as we can," he said. "We're the folks that help make sure the laws we have in the books aren't diluted so the little people's rights, consumers' rights, remain strong."

Mardirossian is heading up the lawyers group at a time when the state courts are taking deep hits in funding that, in Los Angeles, have forced massive layoffs of court employees. CAALA, which is nearly 3,000 members strong, is planning to send 150 members from across the state to speak to legislators this month, Mardirossian said.

"We need to make sure they understand we need the courts to stay open because if they don't, we're going to have people take their differences out in ways civil societies should not," he said. "We'll do what we can to make sure legislators do what they can to fund the courts."

He calls tort reformers "tort deformers," and said he plans to continue the group's longstanding efforts to fight big businesses and insurance companies pushing to crack down on "frivolous lawsuits" filed by the plaintiffs' bar.

Mardirossian also sees CAALA, where he has sat on the executive committee for six years, as a community for attorneys to seek support from their own. One of his goals for the organization is to launch an online system that tracks the status of trials at the central downtown courthouse so members can watch and learn from others.

"It's good to know that in a world of business - where we'd all like to have the next best case - if we can do anything to help the other guy help his client, we're more than happy to extend a hand," he said.

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