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Making a Difference: The Storied Career of Dennis J. Cogan

by Sean Stonefield

In his 36 years as a defense lawyer, Dennis Cogan has successfully represented mobsters, drug dealers, murder suspects, white-collar criminals, and major corporations caught in the government's cross hairs.

His many accomplishments include convincing a federal jury that his client never possessed a gun though his fingerprints were on the weapon and vindicating a defendant charged with murdering his wife's lover after the victim repeatedly identified the defendant while on his deathbed.

With each seemingly impossible acquittal, Cogan's acclaim has continued to grow. In *Philadelphia Magazine*, writers have described Cogan's record

of acquittals as astounding, remarking on his tenacity and intelligence as one of the city's top criminal defense lawyers.

Writing in *The Philadelphia Inquirer* about Cogan's representation of former politician Vince Fumo, George Anastasia notes: "Ask anyone in the legal community for a list of the top 10 criminal trial lawyers in the city and Cogan will invariably be at or near the top. Compile a list of some of the more sensational cases and Cogan will be among the attorneys for the defense."

A Temple University Law School graduate, Cogan began his legal career as an assistant district attorney under Arlen Specter, serving as the lead homicide prosecutor in 75 cases, all of which resulted in convictions. In 1976, he left the district attorney's office to establish a criminal defense practice.

"We took off fast," Cogan says. "We won some very big cases early on, and even though I was still a young lawyer, I was asked to represent members of the Black Tuna Gang in a marijuana importation case that was the biggest drug case in U.S. history."

During the course of that case, Cogan worked with Edward Bennett Williams, a renowned Washington, D.C. trial lawyer.

"Ed Williams was considered one of the best criminal lawyers of the 20th century," Cogan notes. "He made the point and drove it home to me very early on that you can't expect to win every case; what you can expect to do is to try and make a difference, and if you can't make a difference you



Dennis Cogan

shouldn't get involved in the case, and that's been my philosophy ever since."

Over his career, Cogan has built a reputation for his ability to handle high-profile, controversial matters. "We're often among the first criminal law firms called on most cases that are high stakes prosecutions, because people know about the kinds of results we've had," he says.

In one of his most famous cases, Cogan handled the appeal of Neil Ferber, who was sentenced to death for the murder of a reputed mobster and a female companion. Cogan was able to get the case overturned after showing that the police had arrested the wrong man. He then brought a civil suit against the city of Philadelphia, winning a \$4.5

million award—the largest wrongful incarceration verdict in Pennsylvania history—on Ferber's behalf.

Frank Friel, a former Philadelphia police inspector who gathered evidence pointing to Ferber's innocence, says of Cogan: "He is the criminal defense attorney who's not afraid to get his hands dirty. He digs into every case like a miner searching for that one piece of coal that he can compress into a diamond."

"At the end of the day, you're really helping people," Cogan explains. "Our clients have remained loyal to us because we're upfront with them about what we can accomplish in their cases, and when you do a good job for a client, you get gratitude like you don't get in any other specialty of the law."

Cogan has been selected for inclusion in *The Best Lawyers in America*® for more than 15 years, and he has been named as the *Best Lawyers*® Philadelphia Lawyer of the Year for non-white-collar criminal defense on multiple occasions. He is AV-Preeminent® rated by Martindale-Hubbell® and his firm has been ranked Tier 1 in Philadelphia by *U.S. News–Best Lawyers*® "Best Law Firms" for non-white collar and white-collar criminal defense.

Recently, Cogan, who grew up in Oxford Circle, was added to his high school's hall of fame, a distinction that he says is particularly meaningful. He adds that he also appreciates that he can now go to his son, Jon, with legal questions: "The best lawyer I know is my son; he practices at a high level and it's one of the things I'm very proud of." ■