



### **Joe Cotchett 1986-1987**

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**Sandy Dumain:** Hi, Joe.

**Joe Cotchett:** Joe Cotchett. I was president of TLPJ back in 1986. I think we had been around about for or five years at that time. It was a great honor. We had some terrific people from all across the country.

I was a young lawyer, practicing about 10 years, and we brought in some very aggressive young lawyers that were very interested in social democracy. By that I mean, the social movement, as it could be brought about by litigation, and that's how we came up with the name, Trial Lawyers for Public Justice.

It was our bent on giving young lawyers an opportunity to get into the courtroom on issues where before, had not been challenged. And it was a remarkable group of people who started out and I was very honored to be named the president after a couple of years.

**[Sandy:** Were you there from the beginning of the formation of the organization?]

**Joe:** I was not only there from the beginning — I remember the first year in operation. We had some disagreements, as you would with any young trial lawyers, as to what

direction to go. There were some very heated arguments, but always coming together in the end of decisions as to where and what cases we should take on.

Let me tell you, in my opinion, what really got us going.

It was a case up in Boston. It was kind of a flood case that damaged a lot of homes. We were very interested in helping the community -- it was a minority community.

We eventually got into the Civil Rights Movement and in the early '80s, I received a call from Ted Kennedy and a member of his staff about the killing of Viola Liuzzo back in the 1965 era. Remember the Selma bridge march? She'd been killed and it turned out -- through an investigation -- that an FBI informant killed Viola Liuzzo.

The Trial Lawyers for Public Justice came together and decided that was a case we were going to take on. I led the charge. I was, I think lead counsel. We had three or four other people from Trial Lawyers for Public Justice. But the fact of the matter is, the whole group of us worked together. We went down to Alabama. We investigated. We eventually tried the case. And that was the case that really got us off the ground.

The issue was [the killing of Viola Liuzzo in 1965 in the Selma march](#). What was so interesting about the case -- it turned out with testimony before the Kennedy Committee in the Senate -- was that an FBI informant had actually killed Viola Liuzzo.

That's really the case we spent a lot of time on, all of us -- J.D. Lee, Dean Robb, Dan Sullivan from Seattle - we spent time in Alabama digging up information from the Ku Klux Klan, from the FBI. It was quite a case. It was nationally followed. The case got sent up to Michigan for trial.

We [lost the case, but it changed the whole way the FBI operated](#) their informants procedures.

I think that's the case, along with a couple of others that came later, that really put Trial Lawyers for Public Justice on the map. It got a lot of lawyers, great lawyers around the country, interested and they understood at that point that by coming together, all working together, they could make some terrific changes.

In the past, in your community, if you wanted to bring a civil rights case, you did it through your own firm. The Viola Liuzzo case was a group of firms. We decided who would be trial lawyer, who would be the discovery lawyer, who would work with the FBI, who would take the depositions of the Ku Klux Klan down in Alabama.

What it did was it gave a reasoning for being part of TLPJ. [Dean Robb \(TLPJ President 1982-1983\) truly was one of the key lawyers](#) in Michigan that worked with African Americans in Detroit. [Dan Sullivan up in Seattle](#) (TLPJ President 1983-1984), [J. D. Lee in the South](#) (organization's leader 1981-1982) Those were lawyers that just had the

guts and the integrity to really put together TLPJ. It was such an honor to work with them.

[Bill Trine](#) followed me as president and really took it to another level in the sense that his commitment was extraordinary. He really pulled all of us along.

**Sandy:** In those days, when Public Justice — at that time, Trial Lawyers of Public Justice — was doing a case, it was litigated by people like yourself who were board members, as opposed to the way Public Justice operates today with an enormous in-house group of very talented lawyers.

**Joe:** It was the Viola Liuzzo case and a couple of other cases – one up in Boston – that really put the organization on the map. By being on the map I mean it gave lawyers from around the country a sense of joining and being able to work with other lawyers, which they hadn't been able to do before that.

We got into a number of cases from the South where we took on voting issues where people, primarily African Americans, were discriminated against and stopped from voting. We got into some brutality cases where at the voting booth people would be beat up and assaulted. We got into some cases involving school districts, which was very interesting, how they tried to segregate school districts, so we filed a couple of those. And remember – once we would file a case - we were very fortunate because that would bring in other groups. It was really about leading the charge is what it was really all about. It was having the guts to go file a case where other people wouldn't do it.

I will tell you that I spent a couple of nights in a safe house in Alabama where we would have death threats and to be honest with you, they all said they were coming from the KKK – I'm not sure that was the situation. But I do know that but for the guts of a lot of people I worked with, we would never have taken that case [Viola Liuzzo] on.

**Sandy:** You know Joe, as you're talking about the civil rights cases in those days and having to spend a couple nights in a safe house — I've always been struck by the amount of courage it took for everyone who's ever done any of that sort of work, obviously going back to the '50s and '60s, also – the amount of courage it took. But I once saw a terrific live interview with John Lewis and Dr. C.T. Vivian, conducted by Skip Gates from Harvard, and someone asked about courage. They both said, "Well, no, it wasn't courage. It was just something we *had* to do. It wasn't a question of courage or not. We couldn't live unless we did this. It was that important. We didn't think about it in terms of courage or not courage."

But for someone like me looking back on it is as history and being a little bit younger than you, Joe — I certainly see it as courage and have so much admiration for people like you who are willing to do that work that needed to be done.

You talked about how the civil rights cases and the voting rights cases were so important at the beginning. I'm curious though about what kind of consumer protection work was done from the beginning. I assume Ralph Nader's involvement at the beginning had some influence on that?

**Joe:** Ralph, in those days, was basically about safety of automobiles. That's [how Joan Claybrook came into it](#). That was just a small portion of what TLPJ did.

We did not become popular with corporate America. We took on corporate America when the Department of Justice was many times in bed with corporate America — I don't care — Democrat, Republican — what administration you had.

I remember going to Washington many, many times to testify before Congress and/or to meet with elected officials as to what they had to do.

You use the word 'courage.' Yes, there was courage. But I want to move away from 'courage' to more into a word of 'integrity.' The lawyers that I worked with — the J.D. Lees, the Bill Trines -- it was more than courage. It was really great integrity in the process and they wanted to use the legal process to see if they couldn't bring about social change.

I would put the word 'integrity' before I would put the word 'courage.' That's some of the arguments we used to get into, believe it or not, at our board meetings as to what cases we wanted to take on.

This is another thing that was so interesting — that most of us around that table at the outset were veterans. That's a very important point because back in the '70s, we had just come out of Vietnam. I had been a special forces officer. I did 12 airborne operations while I was in the reserves and on active duty. I can tell you, there were a lot of people sitting at that table that were heavily into having served their country as a veteran.

Then eventually, we got into some younger people who hadn't been in the service but still had the guts and the integrity to carry on the operation.

I want to talk just for a moment about the early staff. Our first executive director was a guy by the name of Tony Roisman, who was fabulous. He virtually worked for nothing in DC and he built that staff with heart and integrity. He brought in a young man by the name of Arthur Bryant who really became the guts of moving on and taking over Tony's role.

He will tell you what a wild bunch we had sitting around that table.

Arthur came out of a very interesting background that wasn't used to a couple of airborne nuts, like myself, telling him what to do. We didn't mince a lot of words — and you couldn't. If you were taking on the FBI for their conduct in the Viola Liuzzo case and/or other cases of voting rights, you were taking on some very powerful people. You had to have people with a lot of guts and a lot of integrity to do that.

We'd package a group of some pretty aggressive lawyers, for lack of a better word. For the Tony Roismans and the Arthur Bryants who had to put up with them, we owed them a lot for keeping us all together.

**Sandy:** It's an interesting point that you were all veterans, most of you. I was not aware of that and it is an interesting observation.

**Joe:** It brought on some very interesting people to this group. Everyone around that table had served their country in one way or another, whether they had a uniform on or not. The uniform was part of serving the country. But there were many great people there that boycotted, as they should have, properly, that Vietnam fiasco.

**[Sandy:** What was Arthur's role when he first came to TLPJ?]

**Joe:** Arthur's role was, following Tony, keeping us organized. Again, I want to go back to the fact that so many of us in the early days had a personality or a role in life that was very aggressive and to get 10 of us in a room, the poor Tonys and Arthurs had to keep us all talking to each other, for lack of a better description or word.

**[Sandy:** When did you stop being involved with the board?]

**Joe:** I started out in 1980 or '81, whatever year it was we started the group, and I think I stayed active for about 20 years, then moved into other groups here on the West Coast. The traveling stopped and we put together groups regionally. A lot of the TLPJ people were able then to start their own regional groups. We did one in Los Angeles. We did one up here in the Bay Area. Seattle had a terrific group of people that brought the same cases that TLPJ was bringing.

In other words, TLPJ was the leader that really set the goals or gave the roadway for groups to operate.

**[Sandy:** Now Public Justice has grown tremendously.]

**Joe:** It's probably the leading group in the country that sheds light on the problems we have.

I can't think of any other group. Yes, there's the ACLU, yes, there's the Sierra Club, who are all wonderful groups that we all belong to that want to save our rights, want to save

our environment. But I just have to tell you that the TLPJ - Trial Lawyers for Public Justice - really gave backbone to the ACLU, for example. The ACLU is an older group, but it couldn't get out there and do the litigation that TLPJ did.

That was the key. The TLPJ lawyers, all of whom were a little wacky in their own sense, really stood up and said, wait a minute, we're going to take this on and that all of these groups a path to follow, if you will.

So, while we started with civil rights and equitable rights for people in the '80s, today, many of these fabulous groups took an inspiration from those people and now are taking on Wall Street, Detroit, the oil industry, Big Pharma, pharmaceutical. We didn't touch the pharmaceutical industry in TLPJ early on -- we were out on the streets fighting. Now, as a result of those people, TLPJ, you got these wonderful groups looking out for a bigger group of citizens in our country.