

LAWDRAGON

Searcy Denney's Adam Hecht is Advocating for the Most Vulnerable

By Emily Jackoway



Preparing a client who's been through trauma for a deposition or a trial is never easy. You have to ask vulnerable people to relive the most horrifying moments of their lives, all while enduring a rigorous interrogation and keeping in mind a legal strategy.

It's even more difficult when many of those clients are under ten years old.

That's the case for litigator [Adam Hecht](#), who devotes a large portion of his practice to representing children who have been abused, neglected or assaulted in foster care, schools and healthcare settings.

Hecht first started working on those cases as an Assistant State Attorney in Palm Beach County, Fla. A nationally ranked high school debater and a performer at

heart, Hecht was determined to try as many cases as he could right out of law school – so, he became a prosecutor. In all, he tried more than 75 cases at the State Attorney's office, tackling serious crimes including murder, drug trafficking and child abuse.

It was the latter that impacted him most. "I was very affected by what I saw people do to very young children. Drugs, violent crime – they're awful. But when you see people hurt

children who are the most vulnerable and fragile – they need to be protected,” Hecht says. “So, that's where I realized, I want to be the one to help them.”

After three years as a prosecutor, Hecht made the transition to the civil side, continuing to represent victims of negligence and abuse in plaintiffs’ personal injury and medical malpractice cases as a shareholder at Florida plaintiffs’ mainstay Searcy Denney Scarola Barnhart & Shipley. While he originally had more of a general injury practice, when Hecht was approached to represent children who were physically and mentally abused by a foster parent, he was brought right back to the cases that impacted him most at the State Attorney’s office. Now, about 60 percent of his practice is devoted to representing children who have been harmed, with the rest of his practice predominantly focused on medical malpractice cases.

It's an incredibly different kind of practice, requiring an all-in approach to client relationships; developing the trust of children is different than from adults, especially ones who have been harmed by authority figures in the past. “With children, you have to gain their trust, become friends with them, get to know their likes and dislikes, and you have to spend time with them and their family and not talk about anything that has to do with the case,” he says.

But it’s a calling for Hecht, who not only sees his own children in those he represents daily but recalls what it meant to have a lawyer on his side as a child, when his father was nearly killed in a crash by a drunk driver. “I just remember how we looked to the lawyer for guidance and how he was with us in that very difficult time,” he says.

He has spent the last 15 years doing the same for others.

Lawdragon: Tell me about what it was like watching your family go through the legal process after your father’s accident.

Adam Hecht: When I was nine or 10 years old, my father was driving home from a business meeting when he was hit and almost killed by a drunk driver in an eighteen-wheeler. So, of course, we had to hire an attorney. I don't remember what I had for breakfast today, but I remember that process. I remember the police officer coming to the door notifying my mom that my dad was in the hospital; the lawyer going through that process with my family. So that was one reason why I wanted to be lawyer.

LD: What else brought you to the law?

AH: My sister and I enjoyed performing from a very young age. I took theater classes. I just always enjoyed that rush of performing. It's like that nervous energy that you get in the pit of your stomach, but it's a positive energy. I had it when I was young, and I still get it today when I try cases, take depositions or when I'm meeting with clients.

In high school, I attended a performing arts high school here in West Palm Beach, where I was introduced to speech and debate. With debate, I liked the competition and the performance. I thrived on that. I liked trying to persuade people that my side was right.

So – why did I want to be a lawyer? You just put all of that together. There was really nothing else that I ever wanted to do. I started speech and debate when I was 12, and that's pretty much when I knew I wanted to be a lawyer.

LD: Did you have an idea of what kind of law you wanted to practice?

AH: I knew I wanted to be a trial lawyer. I was told by a law school mentor, "If you want to be a trial attorney, you have to become a prosecutor." I never thought about practicing criminal law, but I knew that you would be in the courtroom every day. And I'll tell you, that was the greatest advice that I was ever given because all of my classmates were applying for these fancy, schmancy jobs at these big law firms. That's just what they thought they were supposed to do. But I was told, "Don't worry about the money. You're going to be making \$30,000. You're probably still going to be living at home. But this is where you're going to be in court, and this is where you're going to learn the skills that you're going to need if you want to be a trial lawyer."

LD: What were some of those early matters that stood out to you most?

AH: The cases that I remember are the child abuse cases.

LD: Of course.

AH: That's when I realized there are very bad people in this world. I was very affected by what I saw people do to very young children. Drugs, violent crime – they're awful. But when you see people hurt children who are the most vulnerable and fragile – they need to be protected. So, that's where I realized I want to be the one to help them.

From there, I left the State Attorney's office, and I was fortunate to work at the firm that I'm working at now. I came in and I was handling medical malpractice and personal injury cases. Then a couple of years in, I received a phone call regarding children in foster care who were abused physically, mentally, and they were burned. The photos were awful. That brought me back to the State Attorney's office.

So, that was the first child abuse case that I handled on the civil side. When I was at the State Attorney's Office, I was putting the bad people in jail and representing the victims. And here, on the civil side, I'm still representing victims. That's what I like about what I do. I like representing human beings – not corporations. I enjoy working with children and I want to help them. From there, that's where my practice is now. I represent the families and children that are either in foster care or schools or hospitals and very, very bad things happen to them.

LD: That's such vital work. What does your day-to-day look like working on those cases?

AH: These are very time-consuming cases. To get a child to open up to you, you have to spend time with them. You have to get to know them; they have to trust you. It's not like any area of the law where you can have a business meeting and say, "So tell me what happened." Children, in my experience, don't just tell you what happened. And the way that these bad people are caught is not because these children one day say, "Hey, something bad has happened to me." Typically, the bad person does not do a very good job of keeping a secret and something gets out. Because typically the children are threatened; they're told by the bad people, "If you say something, you're never going to see your family again. You're going to go to jail." So, the bad people get caught, but it's not the children that say anything.

“ When you see people hurt children who are the most vulnerable and fragile – they need to be protected.

LD: It must be an emotionally trying experience, and so different from other cases. What does that process look like, helping the children you work with trust you so they feel comfortable telling their stories?

AH: Typically, when I get the case, I go and meet with them. In other cases you can have Zoom meetings; you can meet with people in your office. You have a lot of phone calls. But with children, you have to go to their house, and you have to spend time with them and their family and not talk about anything that has to do with the case. Just get to know them. And you have to keep doing it. You have to keep spending time with them to get them to trust you and to open up to you.

And you'll learn from them. I mean, they're not going to tell you everything, but they'll tell you certain things. For instance, they'll say, "He was being mean to me. He was being rude." And you have to find out what that means the best way that you can. "What do you mean that he was rude?" And then children don't want to talk about things anymore. So then you start a new conversation. You start talking about pizza or their favorite ice cream, and then you come back another day and you start again. So you're a friend, you're a therapist, and then back in the office you're a lawyer.

And you're right, it is emotionally draining. My daughter's almost three and my wife is pregnant with our second.

LD: Oh, congratulations.

AH: Thank you. Every time I review any documents or talk to the parents or children, I always think of my children. I think of my daughter; I think about my unborn son. What if this happened to them? And that's why, again, I enjoy this work. It's difficult work, its

important work, but I think I do the best job for my clients because I put so much into it and take it very personally.

LD: Are there any stories you can share about cases that were particularly impactful for you?

AH: I handled a case where there were four siblings that were placed in foster care, and the foster father murdered one of the siblings – a 4-year-old boy – while a sister and brother watched. Obviously, the foster father was arrested and charged with murder, and then the children gave a deposition. It was very difficult having to prepare a nine- or 10-year-old to talk about what it was like. Sitting in the room and listening to them having to answer questions about watching the death of their brother was certainly the most difficult experience that I've had as a lawyer. My job was to prepare them to answer questions. We certainly had to take a lot of breaks. Obviously, in the room, even the lawyers that were asking the questions and representing the defendants were tearing up. These are very difficult and emotional cases for everyone involved.

“ You're a friend, you're a therapist, and then back in the office you're a lawyer.

LD: That's horrifying. In those kinds of cases, who are you suing?

AH: Sometimes I sue the actual bad actors, the foster parents. Other times I sue the child welfare agencies that had the responsibility of placing the children in a safe home and, once the children are in the home, the responsibility to go into the home and visit the children and make sure that they're safe. In Florida, typically there are two agencies. There is what is called the lead agency. They are in charge of doing the background checks and making the placements, making sure that the home is safe to actually place the children in. And then there is what is called a case management agency, and they are the entities that have the responsibility of actually going into the home once the children are in the home and providing the case management services, talking to the kids. So typically, those are the defendants you will see in my cases.

LD: With such emotionally fraught matters, how would you describe your style as a lawyer – particularly in terms of how you interact with your clients?

AH: I'm very calm. I think my clients will find I provide a sense of calm in what can be a very turbulent process. I focus on what I need to do for my clients, and I don't let the defense or insurance companies phase me. I just focus on what I need to do. And I truly enjoy people. I enjoy talking to them; I enjoy educating them. So I always talk to my clients. Every time something happens in their case I tell them what's going on. They all have my cell phone. They call me day and night because I understand that if I had a lawyer, I'd want access to my lawyer.

LD: If you know it's going to be a long process, how do you help prepare your clients?

AH: Just tell them. Really, just having that open line of communication and knowing that I'm going to be here for them the entire way through. They're going to be talking to me. I was taught by Chris Searcy, the president of Searcy Denney that the best way to win your case is to listen to your clients, because they are going to tell you how to win your case. It seems very simple, but that's how I believe I've been successful for 12 years doing this. You have to listen to your clients, and if you spend time with them, they're going to tell you how to win.

LD: What do you enjoy doing outside the office to decompress?

AH: I have always enjoyed playing tennis. I played competitively when I was younger. I also love spending time with my daughter, who is almost three. She's so much fun. She has a lot of energy, so I do not need to work out as much because we probably run around the house a couple miles a day. And then, it's funny, as I've gotten older, I find it very therapeutic to garden. I think it's that feeling of completion. You're starting a task and finishing it, and then you get to look at the garden and it looks nice. It's very calming. We try and stay calm in this crazy world of litigation, but anything that's calming is important.



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