

# LAWDRAGON

## Perfecting The "Roadhouse" Method with Searcy Denney's Jack Hill

*By Meghan Hemingway*

Jack Hill is a stickler for details. He represents clients who've been catastrophically injured due to the wrongful conduct of others. He meets clients on their darkest days – people who feel stuck at the nexus of “before” and “after” a life-altering event. These folks are in



need of guidance as they navigate the system in the face of great loss, and Hill has a deep drive to help. It's his job, amidst the chaos and emotions that swirl, to get the facts clear, dig into the specifics and relentlessly uncover every facet of the case so he may deliver justice in the wake of unthinkable tragedy.

A former prosecutor, Hill not only excels in, but loves the process of working the case – investigating every nook and cranny and learning it inside and out. Hill prides himself on an unmatched work ethic and stamina that enables him to continue with the same tenacity on the final day of trial as he had on the very first day. He believes there's no such thing as being overly prepared because, Hill will tell you, there's usually gold if you keep digging.

“You need to look under every rock to make sure you explore all avenues,” Hill says. “The details really matter, and it's the digging that is critically important because cases can be won or lost on details that you may not appreciate at first glance.”

In the courtroom, Hill employs a mantra he first heard in the iconic 1989 cinematic thriller, “Roadhouse.” In the film, Patrick Swayze's character instructs his staff to “be nice until it's

time to not be nice.” This piece of wisdom has long stuck with Hill and can be used to best describe the savvy litigator’s approach to the courtroom.

“Juries don’t want to see uncivil behavior between lawyers or towards a witness. They expect professionalism,” says Hill. “You can be tough, but you can still be nice, until it’s time to not be nice – the trick is learning when it’s time to not be nice.”

Hill’s been working as a plaintiffs’ lawyer for 20 years. After cutting his teeth in the state attorney’s office, Hill quickly found a home at Searcy Denney, where his practice focuses on medical malpractice, product liability and automobile and trucking negligence. He’s achieved multimillion-dollar wins for his clients – with multiple eight-figure recoveries by way of settlement or verdict.

Though he knows it’s impossible to fully right the horrific wrongs his clients have suffered, Hill is devoted to the details – they’re what help him deliver maximum compensation and as much justice as he possibly can to his deserving clients.

**Lawdragon:** How did you first become a lawyer?

**Jack Hill:** My dad was a lawyer in Palm Beach County. He was a general practitioner. He would tell me trial stories about these fantastic trial lawyers and that had an appeal to me as a teenager. He had a great deal of respect for trial lawyers and specifically plaintiffs’ trial lawyers, who happen to be some of the founding members of the Searcy Denney firm. So that seed was planted early on. I happened to go to school with the sons and daughters of a number of the senior partners in my firm, so I knew who these folks were. But initially, I just liked the idea of going to trial and making your arguments and presenting your case on behalf of your client. I liked the idea of that sort of competition really – that’s where it all started.

**LD:** Tell us about your time serving as a prosecutor.

**JH:** I had this plan to do plaintiffs’ trial work, specifically at this firm, probably even before I went to college. So all of the decisions that I made, whether consciously or otherwise, were geared towards getting to do plaintiffs’ trial work at Searcy Denney. Coming out of law school, I had opportunities to join big firms, but I wanted to do trial work to gain experience in the courtroom. And there’s no better place to do that as a young lawyer than either the State Attorney’s office or the public defender’s office. You’re in court literally every day, trying a ton of cases. You learn how to act in court and what it takes to win. Learning the art of trial advocacy by fire for three years as an assistant state attorney was a wonderful experience.

I was also extraordinarily fortunate to be assigned to a particular judge, the Honorable Paul Moyle. Judge Moyle instilled in me early on what’s expected of a lawyer in his courtroom. Learning how to not only prepare, but also to present yourself and your case in a certain

way was incredibly impactful for me. Those are lessons that I've carried on throughout my career.

***“ With every tragedy, there's the opportunity for the defendant corporation or the drug manufacturer or the building owner, the trucking company or the hospital to learn from their mistakes in hopes that they don't repeat them. That is a big part of what we do.***

**LD:** Once you moved over into private practice, is there a case that stands out as particularly memorable?

**JH:** There was a case that was particularly impactful early on. It was incredibly tragic. It dealt with a pickup truck full of landscapers who were rear-ended by another vehicle, causing their truck to catch on fire. Our clients were the family members of one of the folks that burned to death in this crash. He left behind a minor son who was back in Guatemala, who was a survivor under Florida's Wrongful Death Act. He also had what we would refer to as a "common law" wife – they were not officially married by the state, but they were in a committed relationship and living as husband and wife. Unfortunately, the law in Florida doesn't recognize common law marriages entered into after 1968, but Florida will recognize common law marriages that are established pursuant to another jurisdiction, whether that other jurisdiction is another state or a foreign country.

So the more we dug, we found out that he and his common law partner were in what's called a "unión de hecho" under the laws of Guatemala. We hired Guatemalan lawyers to help explain to the judge how Guatemalan law worked and, ultimately, we were successful in having her recognized as a surviving spouse under Florida's Wrongful Death Act. So not only was the son able to be compensated for his loss, but his common law wife was able to be compensated for her loss as well.

That case was meaningful, not only due to the horrific loss that these folks suffered in a brutal way, but it taught me early on about the need to dig further. You can't just say, well, they weren't married and therefore she's not a survivor. You must look deeper. You need to look under every rock to make sure you explore all avenues. The details really matter, and it's the digging that is critically important because cases can be won or lost on details you may not appreciate at first glance.

**LD:** What drives you to keep doing this work?

**JH:** I would like to think that every case we handle, particularly those that we're successful on, has an impact not just for the clients we represent, but for folks coming down the road. I firmly believe that in every case, there's an opportunity for the wrongdoer to learn when they see what can happen if the rules aren't followed. With every tragedy, there's the opportunity for the defendant corporation or the drug manufacturer or the building owner,

the trucking company or the hospital to learn from their mistakes in hopes that they don't repeat them. That is a big part of what we do.

We recently handled a medical malpractice case in the state of Georgia where a veteran was sick, went to the hospital, was discharged, and came back very sick. Ultimately, he ended up losing both of his arms and both of his legs – he was a quadruple amputee, which is extraordinarily rare. But the fact that he was a very self-sufficient, very independent man who enjoyed doing things for others – for him to lose his arms and legs is an unspeakable, unimaginable loss. This gentleman had every reason in the world to have a dour outlook on life. He had every opportunity and every justification to be in a bad mood, to see the worst in everything – but he didn't. Every time we'd ask him how he was, he would say, "I'm alive, I'm doing great." The generosity of his spirit – despite what he had been through and would continue to go through for the rest of his life – was really inspiring. If I'm ever having a rough day, I think about that and draw inspiration from him about dealing with true adversity.

When I'm talking to folks, the circumstances that bring them to me are oftentimes extraordinarily tragic. You want so badly to do everything you can to fight for them, and to be their champion. You'll never be able to right the wrong, but to be able to get them the justice that our civil justice system allows – that's the fuel that keeps all of us going quite frankly.

**LD:** What is your approach to client communication?

The answer is a product of not only how my team is set up, but who I am. I learned this from Chris Searcy: Listen to your client. They are trying to tell you how to win their case. I also explain to them that I'm always available. They're going to be dealing with a lot, and if I'm able to relieve some of their anxiety by running something by me, I want them to do that. I may not be able to fix it, but I may be able to – and the last thing I want is a client sitting around stewing about something when a five-minute phone call with me may be able to alleviate that pressure or alleviate that anxiety.

In the 20 years that I've been doing this, I have found clients to be very respectful of my time. But if there's an issue, if there's something that I can help the client with – I want to hear about it. I take a very hands-on approach to client relationships.

**LD:** What do you think makes a great trial lawyer?

**JH:** Everybody has different personality traits they draw upon as trial lawyers, but I think there are some unifying characteristics. I think the most important thing for being a good trial lawyer is having an almost obsessive desire and ability to work a case up. The cases that are presented in trial, by and large, are won or lost before you get to the courtroom. A good trial lawyer needs to be committed to digging in and doing the work, to getting all of the facts that you need to win your case and to digging deeper and finding out the things that you may not have anticipated.

They also must have the ability to deal with a high-pressure job. You've got folks who are coming to see you as a result of probably the worst day in their lives and they've entrusted their case to you. You need to be able to deal with the highs and lows. It's like a heavyweight fight – there'll be rounds that'll go to one fighter versus the other, but you need to be able to remain standing and victorious in the end.

**LD:** How would you describe your own style in the courtroom?

**JH:** This is going to sound really cheesy, but I try to model my style on Patrick Swayze in "Roadhouse." He instructed his staff to "be nice until it's time to not be nice." That's really how I try to conduct myself at all things, but particularly in trial. Juries don't want to see uncivil behavior between lawyers or towards a witness. They expect professionalism. Even though we may disagree strongly about the case, it doesn't mean we need to be discourteous to one another. I try really hard to treat all of my opposing counsel with respect and consideration. If there's a witness that's called, you can be tough, but you can still be nice, until it's time to not be nice – the trick is learning when it's time to not be nice.

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It's really important for the jury to understand that what you're arguing is genuine. The jury needs to understand I'm not just saying these things because I'm the plaintiff's lawyer – I'm saying these things because I believe them. From day one, minute one, you are earning the trust of the jury. If they don't believe you, they're not going to decide for you and they're not going to decide in favor of your client. It's fundamentally important that the jury understands and believes you to be credible, that they're able to trust you, and that trust is earned.

**LD:** Do you do any pro bono or community work?

**JH:** I've been on the board of the Legal Aid Society of Palm Beach County for about eight years. It's an organization designed and built around providing legal services to folks in Palm Beach County who aren't able to afford lawyers themselves. They come to Legal Aid and the variety of services that are available at Legal Aid are inspiring – from adoption cases to landlord-tenant issues, to employment discrimination cases. The ability to serve on the board and help guide that process is extraordinarily meaningful to me. It's an awesome organization and we're able to help the citizens of Palm Beach County by giving our time to provide lawyers to folks that otherwise wouldn't be able to get legal representation because of their financial circumstances.

**LD:** What do you do for fun outside of the office?

**JH:** I grew up in Palm Beach County and going out on the boat was big in my family. We would scuba dive and spearfish, and now that's something I enjoy with my wife and two children. We take the boat over to the Bahamas as often as we can. When Hurricane Dorian hit, it ravaged a portion of the Bahamas. As soon as the weather allowed, a bunch of us loaded our boats with generators, food, gas, clothing, diapers and anything we could think of that folks would need. Searcy Denney provided the funding for my boat. Being able to give back to these folks that I had been going to and visiting since I was a kid was really impactful for me. We were able to do that before any of the governmental relief efforts were able to effectively reach them. They were so appreciative and that was really special.



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