


# GREGG CORWIN CALMS DOWN

*How a pit bull of a litigator turned into a pussycat*

By Judd Spicer • Photography by Larry Marcus



A health scare  
helped create the  
"New Gregg"



like the faces of a coin, there are two sides to every person. In literature, for example, think of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde. In the cinema, consider David Banner and the Incredible Hulk.

Gregg Corwin is someone who has grappled with both sides of his nature. As a young attorney he was known as a human tornado, someone who would destroy any obstacle in his path. But today, he takes a calmer approach. Less anger, more conciliation. And perhaps to the surprise of his younger self, he's discovering he can be just as successful without the bluster.

### "I WAS RIGHT, THEY WERE WRONG"

Corwin's two sides were perhaps first defined during his time as a law student at the University of Minnesota. To avoid being drafted for the United States' then-dwindling Vietnam War efforts, he enrolled in the Air Force ROTC. It was a controversial time when students hotly contested any kind of military involvement.

"This was at the heart of the [anti-war] riots on the Minnesota campus," he recalls from his Corwin & Associates law office in St. Louis Park. "Tear gas and everything. And I'm walking across campus from the Armory to Frazier Hall in an Air Force uniform. Then I'd go to law school and the professors would tear into me. Here I was, this super-liberal who's being branded as a fascist. So, I'd change in the bathroom to get out of my uniform because I didn't want to be harassed."

And while Corwin, whose father was a World War II flier, never viewed the battlefields of water and mud, he has, nonetheless, been a soldier ever since. With words as his weapons and experience as his insignia, Corwin has become a pre-eminent figure in Minnesota public-sector union law. Due in large part to his intense work with unions ("They loved me because I was cheap and aggressive as could be. ... I was never going to tell them 'No.'"), Corwin soon gained a reputation for being an intense, tough and downright fiery representative of his clients.

"Gregg Corwin, whom I'd never met, had filed a pretty routine lawsuit regarding an employee who was disciplined by Health and Human Services," recalls former attorney and present-day playwright Elissa Mautner, of her first meeting with Corwin while she was working with the U.S. Attorney's office in 1985.

"In return, I filed an extremely garden-variety answer in response," she continues. "Then, soon after, I was in federal court on a different matter altogether, and all of a sudden this man went flying at my face saying, 'You're a liar!' This is really odd behavior in federal court."

The man was Corwin, and the incident was not singular. Opposing lawyers knew of his reputation for explosiveness, clients sought it out, and today,

with the valuable vision of hindsight, Corwin himself can comment on the side of his coin that is revolving away, as he is evolving forward.

"I used to be a real S.O.B.," he says. "I was as tough as they came, and I saw things in black and white. I was right, and they were wrong. I was going to fight as hard as I could."

"I remember once when I was before the Minnesota Supreme Court," Corwin continues. "[The Court] have these lights before you — red, yellow, green — and I was so adamant in my argument that when the red light came on, I wouldn't stop. I kept going. The judges walked out while I was talking. I couldn't stop. I got so into it."

He continued to wrack up trial wins, building up a career that would lead to his most famous case to date. The Mike Sauro defense.

### THE SAURO CASE

On New Year's Eve 1990, old-school Minneapolis police lieutenant and Corwin client Mike Sauro was involved in a fighting incident at a downtown nightclub. Five years later, then-mayor Sharon Sayles Belton fired Sauro for his part in the brawl.

The now-infamous case of getting Sauro his job back spanned years, jabbing the leviathan issues of police brutality and mayoral power along the way. Corwin got Sauro his job back, before his client was fired again. Corwin would then go on to get his client's job back a second time. The city of Minneapolis would lose over \$1 million in lawsuits involving both the initial case against Sauro and an additional incident that occurred the same evening. Arbitrators, medical experts, the Court of Appeals, the Police Federation, the mayor, police chiefs past and present, college athletes, the city of Minneapolis, internal affairs, community issues, settlements, television, and enough ink to tattoo the questioning hands of every city reporter in this town — all would play a part in the Sauro saga spanning the chunk of a decade. And in the middle of it all was Corwin.

"It was very political because we were taking on the mayor," Corwin recalls of his most visible case. "Our chief witness was the former police chief [John Laux]. And we were up against some formidable lawyers on the other side."

"But, by straightening out the testimony of the emergency room physician, by hiring a use of force expert, by reading the transcript and finding all the flaws in the case that the plaintiff had brought, we were able to turn those weaknesses into strengths," Corwin explains.

"Plus, I wasn't afraid to put Mike on the [stand] and use him extensively," he continues. "I took a big risk. I had him on there for a long time. And that's dangerous. But we worked with Mike. We had confidence in him. And we got him back twice."

Yet while the media was able to capture the way attorney Corwin was changing the landscape for police discipline (his victory warranted a new matrix policy within the Department), it was left to those who knew him, worked with him and opposed him to observe the changing of Corwin the Man.

### A CHANGE OF HEART

"The dog barks but the caravan moves on" is the Middle Eastern poem recited by veteran attorney Clifford Greene that he feels mirrors the growth of Corwin. Greene, of Minneapolis' Greene Espel, has long opposed Corwin in the courtroom. As his well-spoken words illustrate, Greene feels that Corwin has learned, over the years, that there are, sometimes, circumstances beyond anyone's control.

"I have always gotten along well with Gregg," Greene says of his relationship with Corwin. "Even in earlier days when his style was less reflective than it is now. I think he values relationships within the bar, such that he would be reluctant to compromise a relationship even if it's with someone who may be characterized as the 'noble opposition.'"

"Gregg has always been a zealous advocate for his clients," Greene continues. "In recent years, I have not seen Gregg be less aggressive — in the sense meaning a thorough, hard-working, formidable opponent. If I have seen any change, it's been that he has become more philosophical. More willing to recognize that the system will determine results, pro or con, without repudiating his [Corwin's] clients personally."

But Corwin's new philosophical awakening did not come without its nightmare. His recent bout with prostate cancer opened his eyes to much of what he now sees.

"People called, many of them people who I'd opposed. They asked how I was, how I was feeling," he says, reflecting on the disease that he has since defeated. "It made me feel so good. And, I thought, if I had stayed the way I was when I was younger, those calls may not have happened."

And Greene is not alone in witnessing the evolved Corwin. Mautner, the one-time recipient of an "Old Gregg" howl, recently viewed a wholly different man than the one she met nearly 20 years ago. Despite her initial experience with Corwin, she was well aware of his talents and had referred her babysitter to his offices. To be certain the *dog* wouldn't bark, she went along for the trip.

"Skip ahead all these years from '85, and my friend, a Chinese national, needed a lawyer for a discrimination case," she says in reference to another focus of Corwin's practice. "I went with her to see Corwin. And he was *amazing* with my friend. Completely different. It was extremely striking."



Corwin himself is able to stand back and see the changes in the "New Gregg." Maybe it's because of his years of experience. Maybe it's because he's re-evaluated his life after his battle with cancer. Whatever the reason, he is a markedly different man today.

"Because of my work as a Supreme Court arbitrator and mediator, I started to see the other side of things," Corwin says. "That I wasn't always the sole proprietor of Truth, Justice and the American Way. Those combination of things, along with the support I got when I had the cancer — that changed my attitude. Before, I was as tough as they came. I was right, and they were wrong. I was going to fight as hard as I could. And I've changed now. And it's made me a better mediator. I think my best asset now is that I can see the other side, and understand how they feel."

But Corwin still admits that his former self is still a part of him.

"I really do believe there are two sides to every person," he concludes. "And sometimes, my old side comes through. Recently, it happens less and less. But once in a while someone pushes your buttons and the old side comes out.

"Because you know," he smiles, "it's more fun to be the S.O.B."

And so the coin continues to flip, from heads to tails, and back again. Within the trajectory of the flight lies the battle. And it is this force that will determine which side lands face up. **L&P**

## It's Fun to Learn Company Employment Policies — Really!

While a necessary product of the modern workplace, there's not much to like about sitting through company orientation at a new job. The PowerPoint presentations, the mounds of paper needing signatures and the free soda ... well, maybe not the free soda.

HR Tools is trying to make it fun with "Winning Through Prevention" (WTP). Available as a board game or in individual e-format, WTP helps guide new employees through the ins and outs of their company's policies, be it sexual harassment, religious rights or what to do if an employee accuses another employee of stalking. Presenting the policies in an original way, and allowing employees to tackle the material at their own pace, makes WTP a nice alternative to the standard orientation, says John Smith, president of HR Tools.

Originally developed by the law firm Littler Mendelson, the online version allows

employers to customize their orientation package while not overwhelming employees with a surfeit of policies over time. Employers can send the information and quiz-style questions to their employees, thus eliminating the drawn-out sitdown orientation. "After four hours of training, they're going to lose interest," Smith says.

The game's cost is based upon the number of users, Smith says. The desktop version will run about \$1,695 for 10 trainees. The board game format runs between \$500 and \$2,500. Both are available at [hrtoolsonline.com](http://hrtoolsonline.com) or by toll-free (866) 641-1177.

The more digestible and novel delivery of the content will help it stick with employees while keeping the company safe as well, Smith says. "The goal is to prevent this stuff from ever happening in the first place." **L&P**

— Geoff Ziezulewicz

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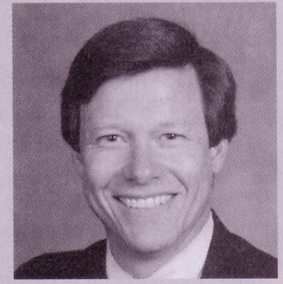
Michael Aafedt has represented employers and insurers as well as several self-insured corporations for over 30 years in the area of worker's compensation defense. He

has litigated every type of worker's compensation case in his practice and has successfully mediated complex cases for various parties over the past year. Although he has a special interest in psychological injuries, heart, brain and occupational disease cases, he finds mediation involving any type of worker's compensation dispute stimulating and enjoyable.



Michael Forde has represented self insured employers and Insurance Companies in workers compensation cases for over 30 years. His practice also in-

cludes mediations and arbitrations. He is a mediator and arbitrator selected by the Union Construction Crafts Workers Compensation Program, and has served as a private mediator for the past 5 years.



James Gray has over 25 years experience in construction litigation spanning a variety of matters including commercial and residential construction cases

construction site injuries, as well as a claims, premises liability claims, and product liability claims. He has handled many cases involving residential water infiltration claims. He has also worked on many cases that involved the interplay of personal injury claims, employer liability, and workers' compensation subrogation.

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