



MARK PAPAZIAN

Successful Trial and Divorce Lawyer Loves His Clients and Cars

by Mike Bailey

TROY—Mark S. Papazian has always loved cars. In fact, one could comfortably say he is an automobile savant—so much so that his uncle recognized both his talent and an opportunity to monetize it.

Papazian, of Troy-based **Giarmarco, Mullins & Horton, P.C.**, is a lot more than just a car buff, of course. He is one of Michigan's top family law attorneys, handling divorce and estate planning for some of the state's elite.

But it's his love of automobiles, as well as the law, that defines him.

"My parents worked their whole lives," he recalls. "When I was about 3 years old, I had already developed a love of cars. My uncle had a gas station in downtown Pontiac, and I would go 'work' with him every Saturday. When I was 3, he would bet every customer a dollar that I could name the make, model and year of any car in the lot or passing by on the street."

While there weren't as many car companies or models in the early 1950s when Papazian's uncle utilized his nephew's amazing prowess, a quick search reveals that scores of different models, years, makes and brands of cars were on the road in post-World War II America.

"He was making about \$20 a day (from the wagers) in 1950," Papazian laughs. "That's like \$100 a day now."

That love of automobiles carried through Papazian's whole life and continues today. "My hobby is drag racing," says the 70-year-old attorney. "I go five to six times a year. My daily driver is a Cadillac CTS-V, which has been modified from the standard 640 horsepower to over 800 hp. It can go about 200 mph. Speed is just in my blood."

Fellow attorney and longtime friend LeRoy Wulfmeier III agrees. "Mark could watch reruns of a NASCAR race from 20 years ago and be happy."

Woodward Avenue ran from suburban Pontiac to downtown Detroit. Papazian says it was the first fully paved road in the United States. "We used

to drag race on it when I was in high school and college. I still like racing and competing. I usually win. There are very few CTS-Vs that have the horsepower I've got."

And, not many attorneys either.

"I've always been very interested in helping people. I care very deeply about my clients, so much so that we often remain friends long after the case has ended. I try to stay in touch with them and maintain some contact. After spending 10 to 12 months with them, I can't abandon them once the case is over. That's just the kind of guy I am."

He says his methodology is to work together with clients to first educate them on the proceedings and what to expect, and then to offer them an array of options so they can help him choose how to proceed with the case.

"This lets them participate in their own case. I tell them what I'm filing and why, and I give them alternate courses of action should they seek those out. Family law requires me to become involved in their personal lives, their emotions, their finances and so I become close to them."

"I've known Mark forever," says Wulfmeier. "He's a great lawyer and friend. He is also a street guy who is sophisticated. By that I mean he is a people person who might be best friends with a waiter and a CEO. Mark has a wonderful relationship with the judiciary in the tri-county area and with the staff. A lot of lawyers are kind of jerks to the sheriff's deputies and the bailiffs. Not Mark. He treats everyone with respect."

And, Wulfmeier says, Papazian uses that pleasant demeanor to his advantage. "I've tried divorce cases with him. He is always well prepared, and he disarms the witnesses with his personality and friendliness. We tried the divorce of an auto executive, and Mark went after the estate valuation expert in the nicest way. But he was just merciless. I don't think she had a clue what he was doing."

BUSINESS BACKGROUND HELPS IN FAMILY LAW

An added bonus for his clients is his background in business, which he says helps him fashion a favorable financial settlement.

After he graduated from Michigan State University, Papazian enrolled in what was then the Detroit College of Law, now part of Michigan State University. After passing the bar in 1974, he opened his own practice. One of his initial matters involved four clients who wanted to open a restaurant. He became so involved in the details and the excitement that he became a fifth partner.

That launched a side career as a restaurateur. "In the early 1980s, I was very active and had a number of places. One of them was a nightclub

called The JukeBox, which for more than 10 years was one of the most successful bars in the country. In an article in 1985, *Playboy* magazine called it one of the top 50 clubs in the United States. We had lines out the door every night."

Papazian worked all day as a litigator, went home to nap and then arose to work his second job at the club.

"Through my association with The JukeBox, I met professional athletes, singers and movie stars. We had an area for the visiting (professional) teams separate from the other patrons, so they wouldn't be bothered." The club celebrated its 30th anniversary in 2014. He says 400 people came to acknowledge the bar's success and enjoy the nostalgia of the old Detroit club scene.

Former law partner and current Oakland County Circuit Court Judge James Alexander says Papazian has always been a likable guy who one should never underestimate. Alexander, a judge for the past 16 years, was Papazian's law partner for 11 years prior to going on the bench. He has had a chance to observe Papazian both in and out of the courtroom.

"You just want to be friends with Mark," he says. "Mark was a saloonkeeper and he knows how to treat the customers. He's an engaging guy who is loyal and trustworthy."

But, Alexander says, in the courtroom, he's a tenacious advocate for his clients, many of whom remain his friends for years. "He's always prepared, and he knows his case," Alexander says. "He knows the strengths and because he's so honest, he knows the case's weaknesses as well."

In addition to meeting sports figures and entertainers in his capacity as a club owner, Papazian has also enjoyed the company of some of Michigan's most prominent people, including Peter Pestillo, a former executive with Ford Motor Co. "Pete came to see me about a divorce in 2011. I've met a lot of famous people, but Pete is the kind of guy I look up to. He is simply the smartest guy I have ever met."

Pestillo joined the Ford Motor Co. as vice president of labor relations in 1980. In 1985, he became the company's vice president of employee relations and, in 1990, was named Ford's vice president of corporate relations and diversified businesses. In January 1999, he was named Ford's vice chairman and chief of staff. He became the first CEO and chairman of Visteon when it was spun off from Ford in 2000.

"We met through my divorce proceedings, but then we discovered we both had an affinity for cars," Pestillo says. "We've been friends ever since. I was a lawyer by training (mostly in labor law). I know more family law attorneys socially than professionally, thankfully. I found him to be very personable in our initial consultation, but in trial, he was very aggressive in cross-examination of witnesses and also with the opposition. He was capable and very thorough. His job was to relieve my stress and cause theirs," something he did well, he says.

Pestillo, who was named the honorary chairman of the Motorsports Hall of Fame of America in 2001, soon discovered he has a kindred spirit in the love of automobiles. "We differ a little in that I like a car that handles well and Mark likes speed and performance. He's a better driver for an old guy and a lawyer," he laughs.

Papazian's background distinguishes him from other attorneys and offers life experiences to which few others can relate.

"I'm second generation Armenian. My grandparents escaped from the Armenian genocide. Three of them made it over to

America. My paternal grandfather died. My maternal grandfather had a 15-inch scar from his forehead to his shoulder. He never talked about it, like many men who were in the war. It was never discussed. I have always had a sense of deep gratitude for what they went through (to get to America).

Papazian's parents were born in the United States and lived in Pontiac where he was born and attended school. He was a straight "A" student, vice president and later president of the student council, active in academic pursuits and in sports like tennis and golf.

"My mother had five siblings, so I had about 20 cousins. I was the first in my family to go to college. Many after me went and, in fact, my aunt started college when she was 80 years old. She's now 92 and is still a substitute teacher in Florida."

FAMILY LAW'S EMOTIONAL COMPONENT

Today, Papazian represents several clients from Fortune 500 firms and two from Fortune 100 companies. His practice is 75 percent family law and about 25 percent commercial litigation. Although he handles legal matters for many of Michigan's rich and famous, not all of his clients are worth "10s or 100s of millions of dollars." Many are people caught up in legal action for the first time in their lives. They are scared, confused and, often, angry.

That ability to completely understand the emotional aspect of family law—as well as the legal and financial aspects—is what separates him from other family law attorneys, says fellow family law practitioner Ann Tobin, of Grosse Pointe Woods, who has known Papazian for over 25 years. "When I first got to know him, I realized what keen business acumen he had. He could analyze a business—almost forensically—dissect the information and get to the bottom line of what a business was worth."

But then, she says, a fuller picture of Papazian emerged. "Over time, I began to recognize his ability to deal with family members. Mark is so good about getting in touch with them. Certainly, there is an intellectual facet to family law, but first, there has to be an emotional one. If the lawyer cannot feel for his clients, he cannot connect with them. Then there is no trust there. Mark feels their emotions first and then gets down to the nitty-gritty of the case. By getting their trust, his clients will listen to him when he is making decisions about the rest of their lives."

"Every circumstance is different," he says. "There are emotional issues to deal with, like the devastation caused by divorce. The parties are often mad at each other. It is a stressful time, but that is not part of the legal issue. Before we can even begin (to attack that) we have to ensure there is some emotional and financial support as well. I've always had the ability to relate to people. I tell them that we need to work on the separation and divorce first and then help the children."

Papazian and his wife, Debbie, have two children. Daughter Tyler is a graduate school student training to be a CIA analyst. Son Todd and his wife Natalie are in the real estate industry in Denver. They have two children, ages 7 and 5.

"The funny thing is that we had a home in Colorado and sold it to buy a place in Florida. But we wanted to be in Colorado with our grandkids, so we sold the Florida property," he says. The family gets together "five or six times a year" for skiing and outdoor winter activities. "Most of our family vacations were taken from January to March. I'm sitting here looking at a picture on my desk of Todd when he was 8 at a ski hill. Now he's 38."

Time and his Cadillac CTS-V have a lot in common. ■