

Leesfield Scolaro Is Accustomed to Winning Big Personal Injury Awards

by Catherine Wilson

Leesfield Scolaro is a Miami-based personal injury boutique with a long record of success. To illustrate, the firm's website lists more than 100 verdicts and settlements worth \$1 million or more, led by a \$40 million award in a negligent security case involving a hammer attack at a Key West resort.

The firm started by Ira Leesfield in 1976 has evolved over time from emphasizing medical negligence to maritime and cruise-related injury cases, which extends to excursion accidents.

Leesfield Scolaro expanded to the Orlando area in 2008, has litigated cases across Florida and has strategic alliances with law firms in over 29 states.

In a question-and-answer format, the firm offers some insight into its thinking and future.

Firm: Leesfield Scolaro

Firm leader: Ira H. Leesfield, managing partner

Head count: 6 lawyers

Locations: Miami, Key West and Orlando

Practice areas: Personal injury and wrongful death

Governance structure and compensation model: Our firm uses open communication and an open door policy as a governance tool. Although we have a managing partner, decisions are mostly made by consensus, often over lunch or at one of our quarterly meetings during the year. Our Administrative Office coordinates any policy changes or improvements. Compensation is mostly influenced by productivity, which is determined by fee production, business generation and overall contribution to the success of the firm. Compensation can and does vary from year to year and everyone's efforts at the firm are recognized by year-end bonuses.

Do you offer alternative fee arrangements? Our practice is



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primarily based on the contingency fee system. However, there are various modifications required by law and the bar rules providing alternative fees as well as individual circumstances..

What do you view as the two biggest opportunities for your firm, and what are the two biggest threats? Our diversity and longevity are the two biggest opportunities for our firm growth and success. In October, we finish our

43rd year of practice (mostly at the same location on Dixie Highway in Miami's Coconut Grove). During the past four decades, we have virtually tried cases and represented clients throughout the entire state of Florida, with leading verdicts in many judicial circuits, oftentimes the largest verdict in a judicial circuit. We have formed alliances with lawyers throughout the United States in every geographical region and continue to have a strategic alliance with other firms in over 29 states. Combined lectures, publications and trial results have established a reputation that brings "Cases from Other Places" in all categories in the cruise line/maritime field.

South Florida is the venue for most cruise cases pursuant to contract/ticket. The merger of case generation from across the country and around the world, along with 43 years of established results continues to be the biggest opportunity for our business plan.

The two biggest challenges are to maintain the "brand" that we have worked so hard to build and to always be vigilant avoiding any notion of complacency. We continue to attract quality cases while understanding the emotional and logistical problems our clients face as a result of injury or death. There is always the possibility that anti-consumer

legislation will "tinker" with the civil justice system, but to date, there has been a consistent respect for the courtroom rights of our clients.

The legal market is so competitive now — what trends do you see, and has anything, including alternative service providers, altered your approach? Is your chief competition other mid-market firms, or is your firm competing against big forms for the same work? We fortunately do not have to compete with other providers because our approach and business plan is so different. We are a boutique firm that provides high-level service and results to a relatively small number of clients. Many of our cases are from strategic alliance with other lawyers and firms that know us over a four-decade period. Our caseload continues to grow qualitatively and quantitatively as our reputation is enhanced with longevity and results. We seldom compete with small firms that are not in our practice area. The public generally sees bigger personal injury firms as being impersonal and not providing individual service.

There is much debate around how law firms can foster the next generation of legal talent. What advantages and disadvantages to mid-size firms have in attracting and retaining young lawyers,

particularly millennials? Our firm has always been a learning center for young lawyers and legal staff, and we continue to attract the very top graduates from local and national law schools. A certain type of lawyer wants to get into court as quickly as possible, handling responsibility for client contact and performing a full range of legal services from research to jury trials. Those are the men and women we attract and retain. This is especially so when they compare notes with classmates in larger firms who are somewhat sequestered from full-service lawyering. We also use an aggressive law clerk/summer associate program, which gives law students and the firm a good opportunity to know each other. For 27 years, our firm has sponsored law student scholarships throughout the state and nationwide. These scholarships also bring a great amount of interest from upcoming law students throughout the country.

Does your firm employ any non-lawyer professionals in high-level positions (e.g. COO, business development officer, chief strategy officer, etc.)? If so, why is it advantageous to have a non-lawyer in that role? If not, have you considered hiring any? Our firm has a very workable and successful blend of experienced lawyers and paraprofessionals at all levels in

the administration of the firm, primarily coordinating specific functions, including public relations, business transactions and other financial matters. We have a number of nonlawyer, high-level professionals who have been with the firm for 30 and 40 years and totally understand the philosophy and work standards necessary to succeed over the lifetime of our practice. We have a managing partner who sets strategies for the firm in individual cases and for firm transactions. The key here is coordination and transparency so that everyone knows what is going on.

What would you say is the most innovative thing your firm has done recently, whether it be technology advancements, internal operations, how you work with clients, etc.? We have developed and advanced the business concept of “Your Florida Connection” trademark. Combined with “Cases from Other Places” and an aggressive fully funded public

relations-marketing program, we are able to work with lawyers from everywhere in representing clients in Florida. In addition, our firm has tried to verdict a number of high-value cases in other states as we continue to work with hundreds of lawyers throughout America. Our technology is first class and totally modernized, including the coordination of three offices throughout the state. Internally, we meet on a regular basis to discuss pending matters and business strategy. We make ourselves available to clients, and they know they can reach us on important matters. Our clients remain an important source of new business and maintaining our standards. Many South Floridians see our innovative technology, which is the utilization of a high definition digital sign, giving the public insight to both our business and community efforts. We are located in the highest traffic area in Coconut Grove on Dixie Highway. Over

200,000 vehicles pass our building daily and our sign, both of which serve as a reminder that we have been here for 43 years and continue as a resource.

Does your firm have a succession plan in place? If so, what challenges do you face in trying to execute that plan? If you don't currently have a plan, is it an issue your firm is thinking about? Our plan is to continue providing high-level, individual service to our existing and future clients which, in and of itself, is a succession plan. Newer lawyers are encouraged to cultivate business from many sources, including classmates and everyday citizens they meet in the community. We are always thinking about how to further expand and raise the firm's profile for new and middle experience lawyers to continue the succession of results in the future.

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