

DRI Membership: It's Personal

By Tony Sbarra

Back in the late 1990s, my then boss (and still friend) asked me to take his place on the Board of Directors of the Massachusetts Defense Lawyers Association. I knew little about the MassDLA and even less about DRI at the time. That changed quickly, and I am so glad that it did. Working my way up the MassDLA ladder exposed me to DRI in ways that enhanced my abilities as a lawyer and, perhaps more importantly, helped me develop professional and personal relationships that I still enjoy today.


Of course, attending large national conferences such as the DRI Annual Meeting started this process. I found—at least early on—however, that the regional meetings were more in my wheelhouse. Up in our corner of the country, the annual Northeast Regional Meeting has become a special event. We alternate between all six of the New England states, with each location offering its own charm and style. The meetings provide excellent DRI updates and CLE programs, but are about much more than that. Over the years I have gotten to know the officers of the other New England SLDOs and many of their spouses and families. I have also had the pleasure of working with the DRI State Representatives for the region. I count many of these folks as not only professional colleagues, but as friends as well.

In the early 2000s, by design, my practice developed from traditional insurance defense to focus more on product liability defense. Included with the products work were these pesky

cases involving asbestos. To those of you who have not had the pleasure, there are two basic features of this work:

1. Like Liam Nelson in *Taken*, you must develop a particular set of skills.
2. Like wrestling with a gorilla, the gorilla says when it is over.

What to do? DRI, of course. The annual DRI Asbestos Medicine Seminar is quite frankly the best program on this area of litigation in the country, and I have attended most of the others. After my first one, I decided to become involved and joined the marketing team. After a few years, I marshalled some courage and submitted a paper and proposed presentation. Since then, I have spoken on the main stage twice, and in breakout sessions several other times. The opportunity to work with and among the best attorneys and experts in the nation in this field is, to use the most overused word in my kids' vocabulary, awesome. As for items 1 and 2 described above, I now have a network of professionals throughout the country to whom I can and do turn often.

For me, DRI membership has been a huge plus. The education, publications, website, and meetings have each assisted me through the years. The people, however, are what really make the difference. Yes, the occasional referral does happen and membership has certainly helped in that area. More important to me are the friendships that I have made. The Grateful Dead said "You will never regret being kind." Kindness has permeated my DRI experience; it is personal and I am thankful for it. 



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