

Hall of Fame 2023

DOUGLAS K. SHEFF

Senior Partner, Sheff & Cook

Boston

Irving “Chick” Sheff opened Sheff Law, a small trial firm, in the 1950s. He became known for obtaining justice for those unable to stand up to large corporations and insurance companies on their own.

Douglas K. Sheff grew up around his dad’s often injured or disabled clients, and was determined to carry on the tradition.

Today, the younger Sheff runs the family firm, now called Sheff & Cook, and has handled some of the highest-profile cases in Massachusetts over the last several decades.

Sheff represented many of the families and victims of the 2018 Merrimack Valley gas explosions, including the family of Leonel Rondon, an 18-year-old Lawrence man who was killed in one of the explosions. Sheff’s work helped secure an aggregate \$143 million settlement, including a confidential settlement for Rondon’s family.

Sheff takes particular pride in the changes that defendant Columbia Gas has made to their operations and procedures in the wake of the litigation, as well as passage through Congress of the Leonel Rondon Pipeline Safety



Act, which protects people nationwide from similar accidents.

“To have this law out there with my client’s name on the bill is just so reaffirming and wonderful,” he says.

Sheff also represented Ursula Ward in her wrongful death case against former New England Patriot Aaron Hernandez over the NFL star’s murder of her son. The case settled under confidential terms following Hernandez’s suicide in prison.

“Ursula was one of the best witnesses I’ve ever had,” says Sheff. “Hernandez gets convicted of murder [in the criminal case] and her first words are, ‘I forgive you.’ To have the faith and grace to be able to forgive such a heinous act is a person I was honored to represent.”

A number of Sheff’s cases, like with the Merrimack Valley gas explosion case, have resulted not just in substantial recoveries but changes to how businesses conduct their operations.

His firm recovered \$7 million for the family of an Exxon employee who was killed in the workplace. Exxon subsequently instituted greater measures to protect workers loading fuel tankers at its oil facilities.

“You’d be surprised how many of our clients care about making sure what happened to them doesn’t happen to anybody else and we make sure of that,” he says.

Meanwhile, Sheff is a leader in the trial bar and the bar at large. In fact, he is the only Massachusetts attorney to have served as president of the Massachusetts Bar Association, president of the Massachusetts Academy of Trial Attorneys, governor of the American Association for Justice and trustee of the National College of Advocacy.

When asked why he’s sought these positions, he says simply, “I love lawyers,” adding that such service has given him more opportunity to make change for the better in the commonwealth and nationally.

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