

# DENNIS VANDERGINST

## The Lawyer-Preneur

by Dan Rafter



ROCK ISLAND—Dennis VanDerGinst and his staff have earned more than 15 million-dollar recoveries for their clients since founding **VanDerGinst Law**.

Based in Rock Island, the firm boasts more clients served than any other firm devoted only to personal injury law in the Quad Cities region of Iowa and Illinois. And VanDerGinst has developed a reputation as a tireless advocate for the clients who come to him.

None of this, though, almost happened. After graduating from DePaul University, VanDerGinst never thought he'd return to the Quad Cities, where he grew up, to practice law. And he never imagined building a firm that worked solely on personal injury cases.

Fortunately for VanDerGinst's clients, personal injury law is what finally captured his passion.

"People who advised me on my career knew that I was more of a people person," VanDerGinst recalls. "They knew I'd rather work with people than with corporate entities. That turned out to be true. I've always enjoyed helping people. I saw working in personal injury law as a way to help people more directly."

Finding the right path led VanDerGinst to a law career that has thrived since 1989. And it's also helped him craft a solid reputation among his fellow attorneys.

"Dennis isn't just a terrific lawyer. He's also a terrific person," says Richard Middleton of The Middleton Firm, a personal injury law firm

in Savannah, Ga. "He cares very much about his clients. That's something that's obvious to anyone who's ever watched him work. And that compassion for his clients has helped him build his law firm."

### Suiting His Personality

VanDerGinst's thriving career in plaintiff's personal injury law almost never happened. After graduating from Chicago's DePaul University, VanDerGinst worked in a law firm in downtown Chicago that focused on white- and blue-collar criminal-defense work. That was interesting work, but it didn't fit VanDerGinst's personality.

VanDerGinst then worked briefly for a law firm in suburban Chicago, where he focused on insurance defense work. That, too, didn't capture VanDerGinst's interest. He lasted at this firm for a little more than a year before deciding that the work wasn't a good fit for his personality.

Not quite sure in which direction his career would take him, VanDerGinst returned to the Quad Cities region to visit family for a holiday break. While visiting, he chatted with some local attorneys who told him that he should practice law in the Quad Cities.

These attorneys, who knew VanDerGinst, also recommended that he focus on plaintiff's personal injury. This field, they said, would best suit his personality.

VanDerGinst followed their advice, though

he wasn't sure that his fellow attorneys were correct. This, it turns out, proved to be a smart career move.

"This is an amazing field," says VanDerGinst, who began practicing law in the Quad Cities in 1992 and has never looked back. "I can't imagine a field that suits me better or that I would better enjoy working in."

VanDerGinst credits personal injury law with exposing him to the world. He once worked on a case involving possible ophthalmological malpractice. This required him to work closely with an expert in the field. It also required him to turn in hours of research.

By the time the case concluded, one of the experts with whom VanDerGinst worked told him that he probably knew more about ophthalmology than did most ophthalmologists. VanDerGinst knows that this isn't true, but it does prove a point: Working as a personal injury lawyer has turned VanDerGinst into an expert on a host of topics.

"When you are preparing your cases, you certainly immerse yourself in different fields," VanDerGinst says. "You fill your brain up for a period of time. Then you empty it again so that you can go on and learn the next stockpile of information for the next case."

For instance, VanDerGinst once worked on a Chicago case involving broker fraud. While preparing, he spent time in the pits at places like the Chicago Board of Trade and Chicago Mercantile Exchange. What better way to learn about the stock market and the lives of traders than by experiencing their rough-and-tumble world directly?

"I got to know all the hand signals, the things that you see on TV," VanDerGinst says. "I got to meet the folks working in the pits. I got to meet the traders and see what made them tick. It was very interesting. And I get to do this kind of thing all the time. There's never a dull moment in my field."

### 'Knowing That You're Helping People'

This, though, isn't what VanDerGinst enjoys most about personal injury law. What keeps him working? The chance to help others.

"The feeling that keeps you coming back is that feeling of knowing that you're helping people," VanDerGinst says. "This isn't always the easiest profession to be in. It's adversarial in

nature. You're arguing with insurance adjustors, other attorneys, corporate heads and whatnot. I don't think I'm adversarial by nature myself. But if you have to endure that constant bickering, the tradeoff comes in knowing that you are helping someone. In most instances, those people are very appreciative. A huge amount of our ongoing business comes from referrals from grateful clients. That's always a great testament to yourself and to your entire law firm."

VanDerGinst points to a case that exemplifies the impact that plaintiff's personal injury law can have on the lives of his clients. A 36-year-old husband and father of three was shopping at a hardware store. As he looked at sheets of paneling stacked upright against a wall, a terrible accident happened: The paneling fell forward on top of him, pinning him to the ground.

By the time store employees discovered the man, he had suffered severe injuries that put him into a coma. The man will reside in a nursing home, in a vegetative state, for the rest of his life.

"This man was the only breadwinner in the family," VanDerGinst says. "His wife was at her wit's end. She was distraught beyond belief. She had no idea how she was going to take care of her young children and keep her house."

The wife visited several law firms. All of them told her that the case was a classic "Act of God" case and that there wasn't much anyone

could do to help her.

The wife didn't find relief until she came to VanDerGinst. He discovered that the paneling at the center of the case had the tendency to lean forward. The paneling company had even told retailers not to stack it upright because of the paneling's adhesive quality: One sheet would fall, and it would pull the next, until several sheets would come tumbling down.

Thanks to this discovery, VanDerGinst was able to secure a large recovery for the man's family.

"Now, the kids and his wife will live comfortably financially for the rest of their lives," VanDerGinst says. "We dug a little deeper than most other attorneys were willing to do."

David Fuller, an attorney in Chandler, Ariz., who has worked with VanDerGinst, isn't surprised by such a result. These are the types of recoveries that VanDerGinst has made a habit out of earning during his career.

"Dennis is an incredible lawyer," Fuller says. "He is always prepared for his cases. He works tirelessly for his clients. And he never takes shortcuts."

VanDerGinst doesn't take full credit for his firm's success. He points to staff members who, he says, are equally compassionate and respectful of the firm's clients.

"Our staff is a special breed, too," VanDerGinst says. "The people we work with are hurting. They are very needy when they

come to us. Our staff may hear the same question 10 times a day, but it may be the first time that particular client is asking it. Our staff members have to recognize that and treat our clients with the respect and compassion that they deserve."

This firm-wide compassion has helped VanDerGinst grow his business. He points to it as the primary reason why VanDerGinst Law enjoys such a strong referral business.

"If you have satisfied clients out there singing your praises, it results in a lot of referrals," VanDerGinst says. "You not only get referrals from clients, but from other attorneys who don't do personal injury work. We also get referrals from the doctors and chiropractors whom we work with. It's all about treating everyone with respect."

This simple formula—treating clients, attorneys and others with respect—has combined with VanDerGinst's strong record of successful verdicts and settlements to prove that VanDerGinst's fellow Quad Cities' attorneys were correct when they steered him toward personal injury work.

"I never thought I'd be working back in the Quad Cities, not when I graduated from college," VanDerGinst says. "But sometimes, your career path takes you to unexpected places. Mine certainly has. And I'm very grateful for that." ■