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# Plaintiffs' attorneys aid UC Irvine think tank

By **Meghann M. Cuniff**

A \$46 million jury verdict in San Bernardino this year went to a plaintiff whose access to the judicial system hinged on factors beyond his control: The strength of his case and his attorney's ability to work a complicated case on a contingency basis.

Faustino Solorio, who lost a leg when he was struck by a car in 2013, paid Mark P. Robinson Jr. nothing to represent him in a lawsuit against the car dealership that employed the at-fault motorist. After 40 years of success, Robinson, sole shareholder at Robinson Calcagnie Inc., has built his career taking on clients who bring little to the table other than a sympathetic story and the possibility of a big future payout.

Now an effort is underway at UC Irvine School of Law that could help more people in Solorio's situation access the civil court system: The Civil Justice Research Institute. "They want to see if people really are getting access to justice," Robinson said.

Robinson and other plaintiffs' attorneys are offering advice and donating money, and a Washington, D.C. veteran who started as executive director last month is solidifying the foundation for what she hopes will be a national force.

"Our hope is that the research will help expand access to justice for all kinds of people," said Anne Bloom, the institute's new executive director. "There's some existing research in the civil justice research system, but it's not readily accessible."

The institute's mission is to provide unbiased research. The background of the donors is clearly on the plaintiffs' side of the table, however.

UC Irvine law school dean Erwin Chemerinsky said on the institute's webpage: "Too often, the courthouse doors are closed to those who have suffered serious injuries and violations of their rights."

The litigation finance fund Bentham IMF announced a \$300,000 donation in May, declaring the Irvine institute is "an academic and intellectual counterweight to the U.S. Chamber's Institute for Legal Reform, an outspoken critic of litigation, generally."

Bentham's money was part of \$1 million in donations collected when UC Irvine announced the institute's formation last spring. Other donors include Robinson, who gave \$75,000, and Richard K. Bridgford, founding partner of Bridgford, Gleason & Artinian, who donated \$250,000.

Like Robinson, Bridgford is a plaintiffs' attorney experienced in class actions and contingency cases.

"There's nothing out there that's doing exactly what we would do" with the institute's research, Bridgford said. The timing, he said, is excellent, given what he said was a perceived unfriendliness to plaintiffs' litigation by the incoming Trump administration.

"This is when we're really going to have to go to work in fighting for those things," Bridgford said.

Bridgford said they envision the institute's research being used in legislative lobbying, legal briefs and general advocacy.

Bloom described the institute as a think tank with a "pretty classic approach to research." They'll work with social scientists to identify issues and determine what data and methods exist.

Access to the justice system is about more than just money and resources, Bloom said. Structural barriers exist, too, and those will be heavily researched. She cited arbitration agreements that are preventing class actions related to Wells Fargo's creation of phony accounts in customers' names.

"You can have all the resources in the world," Bloom said, "but all the money in the world won't help you to get out of" such an agreement.

Bloom joined UC Irvine from Equal Justice Works, a Washington, D.C. think tank focused on public service law careers, where she most recently was director for public programs. She previously was an associate dean and law professor at McGeorge School of Law. She also was a political science professor at Occidental College.

Roman M. Silberfeld, Robins Kaplan LLP's national trial chair, is chairing the institute's 15-member board of advisors.

Bentham, Bridgford and Robinson are listed as founders, as are the International Academy of Trial Lawyers and plaintiffs' lawyers Michael J. Bidart of Shernoff Bidart Echeverria LLP; Robert A. Clifford of Clifford Law Offices; Thomas V. Girardi of Girardi Keese; John C. Manly of Manly, Stewart & Finaldi; and Patrick McNicholas of McNicholas & McNicholas LLP.

Six weeks into her new job, Bloom is focused heavily on networking. The institute's first symposium is scheduled for April 27.

"This is the first time that a major university has taken the initiative to try to tackle these issues in a thorough, credible and unbiased way," Bloom said. "It's our hope that we'll serve as a real resource to the community."

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