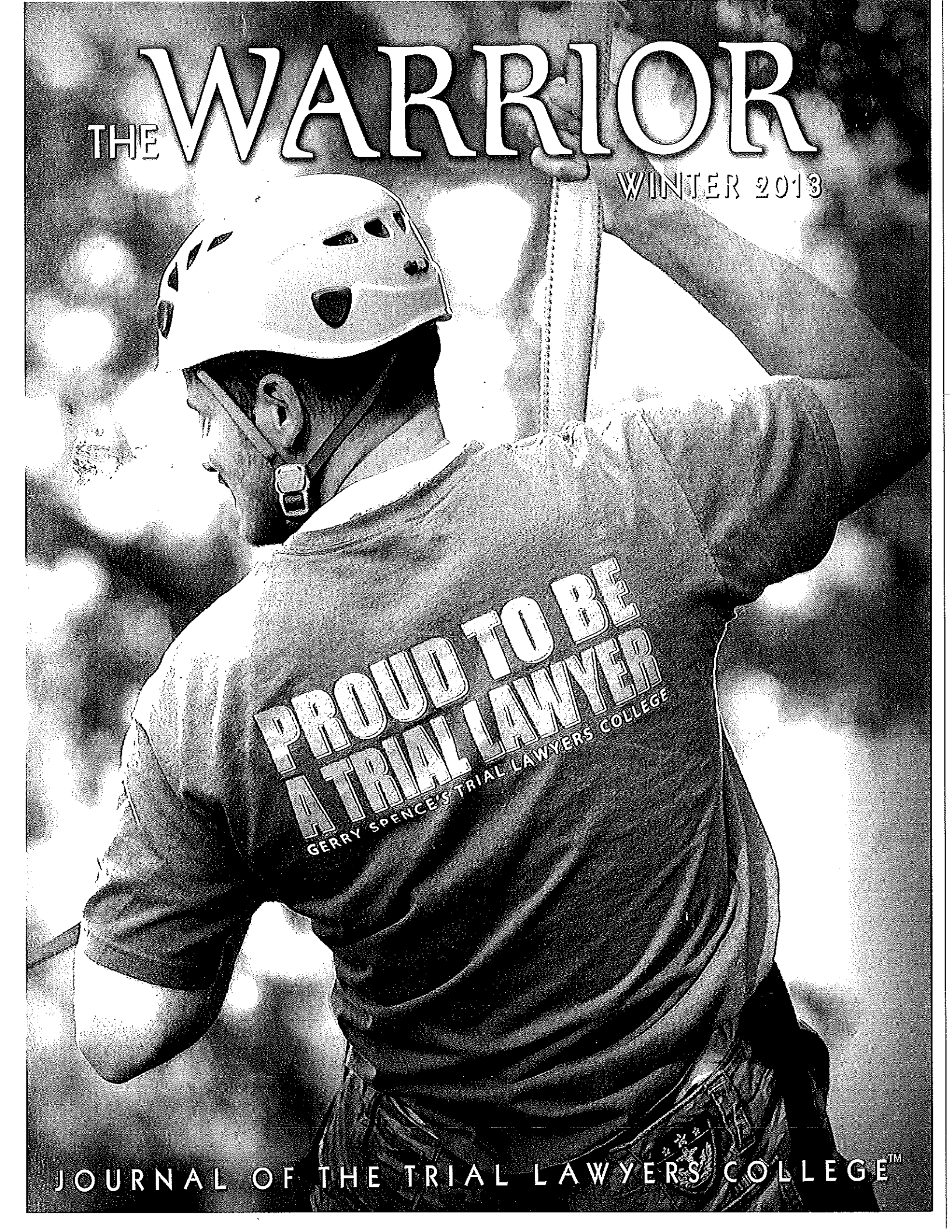


# THE WARRIOR

WINTER 2013



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C O N T E N T S

Message From the President - *Jude Basile* .....2  
F Warrior President's Message - *Ron Estefan* .....4  
TLC Regions Map & F Warrior Board of Directors .....5  
F Warrior Annual Work Week - announcement .....6  
Speaking for Those Who Cannot Speak: Using the TLC Method  
for Civil Litigation Involving Sexually Abused and Autistic  
Children - *Jill Flagg* .....7  
How I Trained My Reptile to Sing the Betrayal Song Without  
Breaking the Rules of the Road - Tips, Topics & Techniques  
for a TLC Closing - *Andy Vickery* .....10  
The Fly on the Wall - *Mark Wagner* .....15  
New Dawn . . . New Life - *Scott Webre* .....19  
The Angry Lawyer - *Dan Stevens* .....22  
Florida Regional Seminar - *photos* .....26  
Crazy Gets Paid - *Paula Elliott Estefan* .....28  
Blind Tears and Solitary Whispers: A Tough Guy's Journey  
Into the Light - *Steve Watrel* .....34  
How to Write Like a Trial Lawyer - *Ian Lyngklip* .....36  
Irreconcilable Differences: Application of TLC Methods  
to Domestic Relations Cases - *Shelley Goff* .....44  
The Sound of Thunder - *Thunder* .....48  
Ranch Club Weekend - *Announcement* .....52  
TLC Schedule of Programs .....53



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# Blind Tears and Solitary Whispers: A Tough Guy's Journey Into the Light

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**Steve Watrel, TLC '03**

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"Jeb" is a "man's man." He's a big burly country guy from rural South Georgia and guns, hunting, fishing and pickup trucks are his passion. When he's not pursuing his passions, he's watching Fox News non-stop. Jeb comes from a long line of "manly men" who believe that a real man doesn't whine and complain about life's challenges; he simply "gets on with it." Expressing feelings shows weakness. He was raised to believe that life is mostly "kick someone's ass" and then make jokes about people who express their feelings. They called "those people" either "women" or "queer."

Early on in our relationship when Jeb was in my office, I invited him to participate in some psycho-dramatic role reversals so we could explore how the injuries were affecting his life and attempt to work on his family communication skills. But whenever we got close to sharing anything resembling feelings or emotions, he stopped and made jokes and laughed about what we were doing. I tried to get him to stay in the moment. The more I tried to get Jeb to share himself, the more difficult our communications became. I became annoyed and frustrated. I understood how his wife and kids felt! He didn't seem to give a damn about how his behavior was affecting his family or anyone else.

I went to Jeb's home to visit him and his family. To really know what his life is like and to experience the ways in which his spinal injuries have affected his life. The first time I went there, I carefully observed the things on the walls, in the entertainment center and all around the family room. I noticed the caption on one photograph frame. It was a photo of his wife and his young daughter and the caption read "To the world you may be one, but to one person you may be the world." There was a plaque on the wall in the family room honoring his service as a coach for his children's baseball team. We looked at family albums of Jeb on camping trips, hunting trips and fishing with his children. I asked him which of those things had the most significance for him and he immediately pulled down a four generation photograph of his elderly grandfather, his father, himself and his four month old son sitting together. He beamed with pride when he showed me that photograph.

In that and many other home visits I see the many ways that his pain syndrome, in combination with his pre-existing disabling heart condition have made into someone other than the

husband and father he once was. He can't help around the house anymore and can't play sports with his children or even go to their games anymore. He is a shell of the man he used to be. These injuries are the "straw that broke the camel's back."

The long-term effects of not being able to do the things he used to do caused Jeb to be severely depressed, frustrated and angry. He was unable to cope with these feelings because his psyche kept telling him to "get on with it." This pushed him away from his wife and children. While his wife and children would sit together on the couch watching their favorite show laughing and joking, Jeb just sits in his "easy chair" in a dark corner of the room with his eyes closed. He lashes out against his wife and children when they ask him to do anything. He would rather sit there in his "easy chair" and sleep.

In the beginning, his wife understood, but over time the tension has built up to the point where they barely communicate. His wife comes home from work at 4:00 in the afternoon and there's Jeb, sitting in his easy chair watching TV not even acknowledging her presence. The remnant of communication still vaguely present between Jeb and his family is tense. Jeb is becoming increasingly isolated from the family. His "manly man" way of ignoring his feelings is slowly destroying his marriage and his relationship with his children. It's clear that he needs help.

After meeting with Jeb many times in my office and in his home I felt like I was wasting my time representing him. I felt that if he didn't care enough to make the effort, then why should I? Why would a jury? It was obvious to me that a jury would have an extremely hard time connecting with Jeb unless he opened up and shared himself. His tough guy "manly man" ways were getting in the way. I recognized that if I did not get help with working with Jeb, then I could not represent him any further. I knew there was a real person in there somewhere and I had seen glimpses of him, but I was at the point where I felt the investment in time and money was no longer worth it.

The truth is I didn't know what to do. So, I finally did what I should have done much earlier: I contacted our own Michael Traynor to work with Jeb, I knew I had the skills to do re-enactments in my office to discover the stories in my cases. But, for true, personal psychodramatic work, I needed a professional.

When I first explained to Jeb what we were planning on doing, he bluntly stated "I'm not doing touchy-feeling crap. I ain't

going for that." It took a lot of encouragement to get both him and his wife to agree to participate in actual psychodrama. I shared with them that I had gone through this same process and how it helped me become a better husband and father. I purposefully avoided using the term "psychodrama." I'm sure Jeb would have never agreed to participate if I had. I called it "jury consulting" and "witness trial preparation" when describing what we were doing. Jeb and his wife were receptive to the latter terms because they were anxious about going to trial and knew they would benefit from trial preparation.

We all met on a cold Saturday. Jeb and his wife looked scared out of their wits when Mike first explained what we would be doing for the rest of the day. I got a few glares from Jeb that I read as "you lied to me you SOB." Despite the initial glares, Mike quickly put Jeb and his wife at ease. He started out by sharing his own life experiences and how he ended up becoming a psycho-dramatist. He did as Gerry Spence does; he "showed his first." Mike built the foundation of mutual trust to get us on the right track. Then, we moved onto some basic rules and then on to the psycho-dramatic work. The feelings and emotions Jeb and his wife shared that day were raw and powerful. It was like lightning in a bottle.

I learned that day about how Jeb and his wife met and about their early courtship. At a summer barbeque, his wife, struck by a tall and muscular Jeb, secretly asks a mutual friend to introduce them. They were inseparable after that. They smile and laugh when describing the early years before his disabling heart surgeries and the later spinal injuries that I was representing him for.

As the scenes from Jeb's personal psychodrama unfold, I learn about how sensitive Jeb is and how he loves children and the elderly. I learn about how, at many social functions, Jeb is the only one to sit and chat with someone's grandmother or grandfather who, before that, was sitting in the corner all alone. I learn that even after two major heart surgeries, but before his spinal injuries, he still practiced pitching with his son by hanging a piece of plywood with a rope yoke around his neck to keep a ball from hitting his chest. I learn that Jeb's family is the most important thing in his life.

I also learn the hard things. Because of the added burden of the spinal injuries on top of an already disabling heart condition, Jeb feels useless as a husband and father. I learn about an early Saturday morning where Jeb is watching from his front window as his wife and children get into his father-in-law's car to take a day trip to "Wild Adventures" amusement park. As they drive out of sight, he cries alone in his empty home as he looks at the photographs of his family which pepper the rooms. They are pictures of his family having fun and living vibrantly without him.

In those tears, I could see so clearly how Jeb had been forced to give up on life and how he had been meanly segregated from his family's experience and growth.

I had never seen this Jeb before. It broke my heart to see what he had become because of circumstances beyond his control. I felt an outpouring of love and need to protect and help him. I also knew to my core that others would feel the same way.

Jeb sobbed as he shared the pain and utter helplessness he

feels because his wife works full-time to provide for the family; and then comes home to cook, clean and be a mother (and a father) to their children. He looked at her and begged for her forgiveness. She, too, cried then. Jeb and his wife told me that moment was the first time in years that they shared any true feelings about each other to each other. Jeb saw and understood that his family needed him to still be a husband and father and that they loved him despite his physical challenges. He saw that being a "manly man" was tearing him from his family and he was finally able to drop the "hard ass" facade and share himself.

And, when Jeb did that—when he shared with us in action his honest personhood—he became real to me. Of course, Jeb feared that being honest and sharing the feelings roiling beneath his skin would reveal him as weak. Instead, it drew me to him as I knew it would draw the jury to him. It made him worth fighting for.

"The children are never going to get this time back," Jeb's wife whispered to me when our long day's work had ended. "Jeb's never going to get this time back either." As I listened to her, I knew that was true. It was not something she had to tell me. I had seen it for myself.

It was all so *simple*, really...but it was *hard*. At the end of it though, the magnitude of what had been lost was poignantly revealed.

The lesson I learned from this experience is that I need to use the tools and insights given to us through the TLC Method when I am dealing with a person like Jeb. If I had embraced the needed psychodramatic work sooner I would have been able to discover Jeb *much* earlier and likely save everyone involved a lot of frustration.

In the end, it saved me from almost giving up on a man so worth fighting for. I have never forgotten that. It is with me yet. ☺

#### ENDNOTE

- 1 "Jeb" is not my client's real name.

*Steve lives in Jacksonville, Florida with his wife, Kathy, and their daughters Katie (11) and Ceci (5). In his spare time, he enjoys working out, bicycling, gardening, and traveling.*

