

# ADAM ZEBELIAN

## Matrimonial Law a Better Fit Than Murder Trials for Litigator

by Ed Finkel

Adam M. Zebelian's first murder jury trial was a gang-related triple homicide. It was the first of two murder trials and 18 overall jury trials he handled in his 7½ years as an assistant state's attorney in Cook County.

That trial was a career inflection point for Zebelian, who joined the Chicago matrimonial law firm of Schiller, DuCanto & Fleck LLP in January 2017.

Zebelian questioned several witnesses in the case. One was the medical examiner, who walked the jury through the nature of the victims' wounds. And even more searing, he read the victim impact statements composed by the families at sentencing.

"Afterward, I went to my office, and I was bawling because it was such an intense moment (during the sentencing) to appear on behalf of the victims who were killed—but also to watch another life be taken away in front of me, in the sense that (the defendant) was going to spend the rest of his life in prison," Zebelian says.

"As much as it felt good to obtain justice for those victims and those families, it was also painful to watch the defendant's family lose their son, too."

The experience made Zebelian, now 36, realize that despite the importance of prosecutorial work and his immense respect for those who do it, it wasn't how he wanted to spend the rest of his life.

"It's such a hard thing to watch and participate in," he says. "The whole situation was very sad. There were no winners."

### MOVING TO MATRIMONIAL LAW

Zebelian became an associate at Schiller, the largest matrimonial law firm in the country, at the suggestion of partner Thomas Villanti. Villanti's wife worked with Zebelian at the state's attorney's office, and the two had become friendly.

Although he had never considered the practice area before, Zebelian deduced there would be several similarities. He also realized that private practice would help pay off loans from The Dickinson School of Law at Pennsylvania State University, where he received his law degree in 2009.



"There's lots of overlap," Zebelian says. "I like helping people and solving problems, and I thought it was probably a good fit. It's probably the most emotional area of law, and I have always dealt well with highly emotional situations—be it as a state's attorney or just in regular life. I'm very good at defusing tension and giving good advice."

Villanti says Zebelian's people skills and thorough preparation endear him to not only judges but also opposing attorneys.

"You can have a highly stressful, high-conflict situation, and once Adam starts talking, the tension goes away, and people will start acting a little bit more reasonably," he says.

"Adam is a really good litigator, he has excellent courtroom skills, and the clients all trust and respect him," says Villanti.

Anita Ventrelli, the partner with whom Zebelian probably works the most, says she always figures those with prosecutorial experience know how to think on their feet. But

it wasn't anything specific on Zebelian's resume that prompted her to recommend hiring him.

"It was his presence," Ventrelli says. "There was a genuineness, a thoughtfulness and a burning desire that emanated from him to take his litigation practice to another level."

That early promise played out the way Ventrelli imagined. "He does whatever it takes to get the job done, and he relishes it," she says. "He's at home in the courtroom, he loves putting on testimony. When he came to us, the first times we had him putting on witnesses, it was evident that he came in head and shoulders over most people who are in his age range—and not just because he's tall."

Zebelian's people skills have also helped him to succeed in the practice, Ventrelli says. "Adam finds a way to connect with people and tell their stories effectively," she says. "No matter what the outcome is, people understand where it came from, they understand the risks going in. I couldn't have asked for a better acolyte."

## RECENT MATRIMONIAL CASES

About seven months after arriving at Schiller, Zebelian was involved with a child removal case in which the mother—his client—was trying to bring the child with her to Europe. Zebelian served as second chair to the partner on the case, so he insists he shouldn't get the primary credit. But the experience definitely helped him get his feet wet in matrimonial law.

"That's a very difficult (type of) case to win, and we won that case," Zebelian says. "It's always an uphill battle. It helped that our client was a professional, and she was a very good mother and a very involved mother. It's always easier to look good as a lawyer when you have a good client.

"Since then, I've been on several evidentiary hearings and trials because my history as an assistant state's attorney—and the amount of trial work I did there—has segued well into being a matrimonial attorney."

Among the roughly 80 clients or matters he has handled was the case of Tamra Baer, who had been divorced for six years but wanted to modify her custody judgment. The post-divorce proceeding—with cross-motions to alter decision-making and the parenting schedule—worked out as Baer had hoped.

"Adam is fabulous," she says. "I thought his knowledge of the law, with his previous experience with the state's attorney's office, gave him really good attention to detail. He was great—we won everything we put before the court.

"From what I've been told, it's very difficult to get additional time once an agreement is put in place. I thought I was the underdog. The fact that it ended up coming in my favor was fabulous."

That included more time with her children and ensuring that more money would be withdrawn from her ex-husband's paycheck.

"Adam was available 24-7, was very professional and he has good relationships, not only within the firm," she says. "Anything I asked of him, he delivered. He was able to talk me off the ledge when I was getting very frustrated."

Among the good relationships Zebelian forged was with the judge, whom Baer described as very strict, to the point where Baer had begun to refer to her as "Judge Judy" outside of court. "She would yell at everybody—but she wouldn't yell at Adam," Baer says. "He was very respectful to all involved."

Villanti, who tried the case with Zebelian, describes the dynamic similarly. "Adam would make her laugh, make her smile. We decided midway through the trial that Adam was going to do all the witnesses. For whatever reason, his personality was meshing well with the judge," he says. "The outcome was awesome for the client. It was a good decision."

Zebelian feels like he's meshing well with the practice area of matrimonial law. "I've really enjoyed it," he says. "I've helped a lot of people in a very bad period of their lives, which has been very rewarding. I have a degree in human biology (from Michigan State University). I always liked math, and there is a lot of math in divorce law." He says math is especially important in valuing and dividing up assets.

## VARIETY OF CAUSES

Although some friends and colleagues wonder how he possibly finds the time, Zebelian has become a board member of both the Lesbian and Gay Bar Association of Chicago (LAGBAC) and the Chicago Bar Association. He also belongs to the National LGBT Bar Association, the Illinois State Bar Association and the Women's Bar Association of Illinois.

Sulema Medrano Novak, a partner at SmithAmundsen LLC in Chicago who started at the Cook County State's Attorney's Office the same day as Zebelian and has been a friend ever since, continues to overlap with him professionally in her role as regional president for the Hispanic National Bar Association.

"Despite the heavy demands and requirements of private practice, Adam takes the time away from his personal and social life to further the mission of LAGBAC and other diverse bar associations, and to give his time to the community to strengthen the overall Chicago legal climate," she says.

Zebelian has volunteered for the last several years for the Chicago Metropolitan Battered Women's Network, where he's served as host committee chair and led efforts for its annual fundraiser. He also co-founded and serves on the board of Stonewall Sports Chicago, an LGBTQ-oriented sports league.

"I don't really have much free time, to be honest," he says. "I like playing kickball." In fact, Zebelian is captain of his team, called the Basic Pitches, and travels the nation, from Las Vegas to Austin, Texas, to participate in tournaments. He also enjoys spending time with his boyfriend, Raul—a costume designer who has worked for some of the drag queens in *RuPaul's Drag Race*—and their two rescue dogs, Leo and Coco.

Zebelian has stayed close with his family, which includes his brother, Joseph Miel Zebelian an internal medicine resident at the suburban Detroit hospital where they were both born. Zebelian takes pride in having introduced his brother to a London native who is now his girlfriend. They met at the Gay Pride Parade in Amsterdam last year.

"My brother went to Gay Pride with me and all my friends," Zebelian says. "He's the only straight guy (in the group), and he ends up meeting his girlfriend. Actually, I met her first, so I take all the credit for it."

## A COLLEGIATE ADVOCATE

The Zebelian brothers grew up in the small town of Armada, Michigan. Their father, William Zebelian, was a gym and history teacher when Adam attended middle school. He had become principal by the time his brother, who's 5½ years younger, made it there. Their mother, Julie Miel Zebelian, is a research scientist, but she came from a long line of attorneys—one of her grandfathers was a county prosecutor and the other a county judge, Zebelian says.

"I grew up with a certain respect for the law and lawyers," he says.

What really pointed him toward the law, in retrospect, was his decision to take a stand against a longstanding tradition among high school students in his town. On the last day of school, some upperclassmen would line up their vehicles in what was known as "truck row," adorned in Confederate flags, and then parade around town. A college student at the time, Zebelian was particularly inspired by the aghast reaction of his brother and his friends, who were then in middle school.

"I wrote an article in the small-town paper *Armada Times* saying how awful this was," he says. "It was this odd, deplorable tradition. I said how it needed to change and should not be tolerated by anyone in town. And that was the last year they had the parade. There was a huge debate in the town about whether it should continue, which is mind-boggling now."

The experience proved foundational for Zebelian. "I remember the gratification that I got from helping end that terrible tradition in our small town," he says. "I realized I was able to advocate for things I thought were right and that I was good at it. The mothers of some of the kids wrote in and said I was misinterpreting what they were doing—that they were rebels, and it's not racist. The town was divided on whether it should continue as a tradition. But that was the last year it happened, and to this day, I'm very proud of that."

Zebelian continued to enjoy life in general and taking a stand for what he thought was right as a law student at Penn State.

"I moved to Pennsylvania by myself, I didn't know anyone, and I made friends from all over the country, from all walks of life," he says. "I came out of the closet, fully. It was probably my favorite period of time of my entire life, those three years in rural Pennsylvania with my law school friends."

## OPTING FOR THE STATE'S ATTORNEY

During law school, Zebelian considered becoming a public defender, but his criminal law professor, a former public defender, told him a good prosecutor could accomplish more. That led to summer internships with the prosecuting agency in the city of Warren,

Michigan, and the Cook County State's Attorney's Office, which hired him when he passed the bar.

Zebelian's former colleagues there sing his praises just as loudly as his current office-mates at Schiller. Then-first assistant state's attorney Dan Kirk, who's now manager of strategic planning at Exelon, recalls that Zebelian worked his way up faster and gained more notice at higher levels of the office than the vast majority of new hires.

"His name percolated up to everybody, including the state's attorney herself," Kirk says. "He became very well-known as somebody who was very smart, very hard working and a good partner to have. If he finished his work early, he would pick up other people's work. He was reliable and trustworthy, and somebody you could look to for advice. And he's a very likable person. I don't know anybody who didn't like him or enjoy his company."

For all those reasons, senior attorneys often "cherry-picked" Zebelian to work on cases with them, Kirk says. "In each and every instance, the feedback I would hear was, 'This Adam Zebelian guy is a rock star. He's going places in this office. He's a future leader.' If he had stayed in the office, he would have been."

Medrano Novak says Zebelian has an unusual combination of natural gifts when it comes to both the quieter, reading and writing side of being a lawyer, as well as handling litigation.

"Being on your feet in front of a judge or jury, getting your story out clearly, and in a persuasive manner that is not overly aggressive—that is something he has been recognized for, on multiple occasions," she says. "Adam has all the skill set he needs to be an excellent attorney."

Matt Jannusch, an assistant state's attorney who worked with Zebelian and currently serves on the board of LAGBAC with him, recalls that Zebelian's networking and listening skills "impressed the socks off our hiring committee. There was no doubt that he was going to be hired."

And Zebelian continued to impress with his work ethic and developing courtroom skills, says Jannusch, who was interviewed for this article while attending a recruiting fair at the National LGBT Bar conference.

"I'm here right now hoping to find the next Adam Zebelian for our office," he says. "We miss him dearly. I understand why he went to Schiller, DuCanto & Fleck. But I can't say enough about him. His work ethic, his personality, and his temperament are just amazing. He is a delightful human being." ■