

# MICHIGAN LAWYERS WEEKLY

## LEADER IN THE LAW

### *Steven M. Gursten*

*Practice specialty: Personal-injury litigation*

*Law school: Fordham University*



**H**e is a personal-injury lawyer, but Steven Gursten tends to slip out of character.

For one thing, he said he hopes to become “a lot less busy” by forcing trucking companies to adhere to safety standards.

Then there’s what he pinpointed as the secret to his success: “If you really want to excel in your profession, you can’t be in it to make the most money.”

Certainly that’s not the popular stereotype of the opportunistic personal-injury lawyer.

No, Gursten said he is trying to bring back what he calls the original intent of his practice area: “Helping people and making a difference.”

As a partner at Michigan Auto Law (Gursten, Koltonow, Gursten, Christensen & Raitt, PC), he said he hopes that attitude will help him change the public’s perceptions of his chosen specialty.

“I’ve been consistently trying for 10 years to break the conventional model of what is a personal-injury lawyer,” he said.

But, he acknowledged with a laugh, “We’re fighting a losing battle.”

If that proves true, it would be one of the few battles Gursten, 39, hasn’t won in his nearly 14-year career, a career that has seen several multimillion-dollar verdicts in his clients’ favor.

In September 2008, he settled a case against Utica Transit Mix and Supply Co. for \$3.9 million after one of the company’s gravel trucks struck and killed motorist Patrick Nunez. It was revealed the driver of the truck had not been properly trained and was on powerful anti-seizure medication that impaired his response time.

Gursten blames the tragedy on lax trucking-safety regulations in Michigan, something he hopes to change through litigating rogue companies.

“This doesn’t happen in other states,” he said. “This was such a needless, preventable death.”

As a member of the board of governors for the Association of Interstate Trucking Lawyers of America, Gursten has worked on legislative changes to make trucking companies safer.

He blamed the Bush administration for trying to loosen trucking regulations.

Gursten’s safety-reform efforts have been “pretty lonely the last couple of years,” he said. “Hopefully, this is all going to start changing with the new administration. My hope is that we will have a far more sympathetic ear to tackle the unsafe trucking companies.”

Such cooperation from the Obama administration, Gursten said, could bring closer to reality his goal of making Michigan roads safer.

Gursten said he doesn’t see personal-injury law as a business, or as a means to an end, but as a chance to affect real change in people’s lives.

After graduating from Fordham University in New York, he had the chance to work at a high-profile law firm, but opted instead to return to Michigan to practice alongside his father, Michigan Auto Law partner Lawrence Gursten.

“I really wanted to come home and help people,” Steven Gursten said.

His father, however, wanted his son to come home for the right reason.

“I won’t let you come home,” his father told him, “unless you really want to help people.”

In his third year practicing law, Steven Gursten took on a minor-impact, soft-tissue case in which Allstate initially offered \$10,000. Against the advice of colleagues, he decided to delve deeper into the matter, eventually securing a \$1 million settlement for his client.

“That changed my career,” he said, “because if I had just taken the offer, I really think no one would know who I am today.”

Plenty of people know who he is, and they want what he knows. Because of his success in auto- and truck-injury cases, he regularly lectures at legal seminars and contributes to legal publications. And, he is listed as one of the top 100 trial lawyers by the Association of Trial Lawyers of America.

Gursten uses a mentoring program he started at Michigan Auto Law to encourage young lawyers, law students and interns to attend trials, depositions and mediations to learn auto-negligence law firsthand. Through the mentoring program, he hired four attorneys he said were committed to the same values of public service.

He said he hopes such mentoring will help “turn loose a whole new generation of lawyers who could make more of an impact than I could by myself.”

- Megan Pennefather