

LISA CIHARAN

Trial Lawyer From Romania 'Does It All' for Injured Clients

by Ruth Kaufman



Born in Romania and fluent in Romanian, Lisa M. Ciharan, an associate at Anesi, Ozmon, Rodin, Novak & Kohen Ltd., has been a plaintiff's personal injury trial lawyer since 2012. Ciharan zealously advocates on behalf of clients who have suffered injuries or death due to the negligent or careless conduct of others.

"She's one of our rising stars here and now an Emerging Lawyer, so she has both going for her," says Mark Novak, president of Anesi Ozmon. "Lisa is a tremendous trial lawyer who recently had a \$500,000 verdict on a difficult case."

Novak explains that Ciharan has a certain quality that not every trial lawyer possesses: a commanding presence in the courtroom.

"When she stands up to give her opening statement, cross-exam or closing, every eye is fixated on her. You can train a lawyer to do many things, but to have presence and command authority really can't be taught. Lisa just possesses this really remarkable gift. It's a rare commodity in our business."

A DIFFICULT JOURNEY

Ciharan's journey to success in personal injury law began in Romania, where her father was a well-regarded shoe designer. In the early 1980s, an uncle in the United States tried to bring Ciharan's father overseas. At that time, the communist government sought to

keep skilled workers in the country and was reluctant to allow citizens to receive passports and other documents needed to leave.

After continuous government interference, Ciharan's parents lost all hope that they'd be able to emigrate. When her mother was five months pregnant with her and without telling anyone, her parents decided to leave their 2-year-old son with relatives so they could try to cross into Yugoslavia.

While still in Romania, bad weather struck. A family in a small village sheltered Ciharan's parents. The villagers then called the police, who let Ciharan's mother go because she was pregnant, but imprisoned her father for four months as an enemy of the state and a flight risk.

After Lisa was born, the family's quest for freedom continued. Her father's uncle was able to obtain Ohio senator John Glenn's help to involve the U.S. Embassy and to obtain passports, though the process dragged on until Ciharan was 2.

Then, suddenly, the family was given their passports and ordered to leave within 48 hours. A gentleman on their flight kept asking questions and making conversation with Ciharan's father. After arriving in the United States, the man introduced himself and explained he was a spy from the American embassy assigned to make sure they arrived safely.

Ciharan grew up in the small town of

Hubbard, Ohio. Her father made orthopedic shoes for individuals who had deformed feet. Her mother worked her way up from a restaurant server to the general manager of an Old Country Buffet.

In fourth grade, Ciharan started playing soccer in a league. During middle school, she played on the boys team because it was more competitive. In her freshman year of high school, she started on the varsity girls' team as center midfield.

Her strategy for success in soccer applies to her legal career today: "You have to maintain a perspective of the entire field and be aware of what's going on at all times all around you—every decision and movement of the ball affects the field and the rest of the game."

Because her parents weren't familiar with the American education system's requirements, Ciharan took on the task of understanding its peculiarities as early as seventh grade. She took the lead, for example, in researching college scholarship applications and what the SATs and ACTs were.

ATTRACTED TO THE LAW

Before eighth grade, she was actively looking up high school summer academic programs. She attended one program, now known as Junior State of America, the summer before her junior year. She spent four weeks at Yale University studying both constitutional law

and public speaking and the law. Although Ciharan wanted to be a lawyer since her youth, the program confirmed her interest. She confidently told people she wanted to be a lawyer.

The summer before her senior year, Ciharan attended the eight-week Secondary School Program at Harvard University, taking classes including psychology and constitutional law. But because she missed so many soccer practices and games while at Harvard, her coach kicked her off the varsity team.

While making academics her priority in high school (she was the valedictorian of 220 and was nominated most likely to succeed), she was very active in the local chapter of a national youth organization named A.R.O.Y. (American Romanian Orthodox Youth). As a senior in high school and for two years in college at The Ohio State University, Ciharan served on A.R.O.Y.'s national board. In her senior year, she was the national president.

She graduated from OSU *cum laude* in 3½ years with a double major in psychology and sociology while working between 16 to 30 hours a week at the University's Student Safety Services. There she provided security at events—such as football and basketball games and concerts—and drove a shuttle service for students until 3 a.m. Though she had scholarships to cover most of her tuition, she needed to pay for books and other expenses.

The summer after high school graduation, Ciharan met her future husband Viorel on a soccer field in Jackson, Michigan, through her church. They had a long-distance relationship for more than three years and got engaged the month she graduated from college. They've moved four times since, always in Skokie. They have one son and two daughters ages 7, 5 and 2. Her husband has owned a construction company for over 12 years and works in interior remodeling all across the city and suburbs.

Ciharan's husband worked while she studied at DePaul University College of Law. In a house they rented from her husband's best friend, he built out an 8-by-8 room in a corner of the garage for her study space.

Ciharan competed in moot court competitions locally and across the country, making it to the American Bar Association's octa-finals round in her second year. During her third year, Ciharan served on the moot court board. During winter break that year, she gave birth to her son, leaving her to study for the bar exam the next summer while caring for a six-month-old infant.

"It was very stressful and exhausting at the time," Ciharan says, "but I would do it all over again."

Law school employment included clerking for the Cook County State's Attorney, being a judicial extern for Circuit Court Judge James

Murray and a law clerk at a prestigious workers' compensation firm. Ciharan knew she wanted to help people, and though she enjoyed workers' comp, she found the personal injury discovery process more detailed and better suited for a perfectionist. She wanted to be a trial attorney to follow her passion for being in the courtroom.

LEARNING ABOUT LITIGATION

Ciharan considered it a privilege to work at the Detroit-based Law Office of Cy Weiner for nearly five years right after law school because it forced her to learn the intricacies of litigation; she was the only attorney at the Chicago office for nearly two years. Because she had no assistant at first, Ciharan was doing the work of a receptionist, a paralegal and an attorney, giving her the opportunity to sink or swim and learn from the trenches.

Quickly learning to "swim," Ciharan successfully handled dozens of cases. However, she realized she needed mentorship and the ability to talk to colleagues about case

development.

Late one night while preparing for trial, she received an email from a law school friend who was also friends with an attorney at Anesi Ozmon. The email asked whether she still practiced personal injury law. Two days later, she had her first interview.

"The unexpected opportunity was the best thing that could've happened," she says. Even so, leaving her firm was difficult. Though her boss was supportive of her moving on, telling him was hard because he was like family to her.

Ciharan values the atmosphere at Anesi Ozmon, saying everyone is so knowledgeable and collaborative and thrilled for the success of everyone else that it feels like a family. She concentrates her practice in the areas of premises liability, vehicular collisions, medical malpractice and nursing home negligence.

"Not only is she a devoted mother and devoted wife, but she also has a real bond with each of her clients," says Novak. "They continue to rely on her and trust her to do her very best on their behalf. Each client is special



Anesi Ozmon lawyers at 2018 WBAI Annual Installation Dinner. From left: Steve Berman, Brian Teven, Jennifer Kelly, Adam Gilbert, Ciharan, Michael Teich, Hayley Graham Slefó



Ciharan with husband Viorel Ciharan in Dubai for 10th anniversary in 2018



At a Romanian Festival with, from top, children Isabella, Christian, Maria

and not simply another case to Lisa. She really cares and gets distraught if something bad happens. She takes it personally. She gives her max to every assignment she has with this firm.”

In a recent premises liability trial, a mother of five adult children who was an intake manager for a disabled adults home was on her way to a restaurant’s basement dining room. She fell on a 10¼-inch stair that wasn’t code-compliant and lost her balance, fracturing her ankle and wrist.

The favorable verdict of \$500,000 mentioned 0% contributory negligence, Ciharan says. “The client felt (the defense) was blaming her, so it was important that she be vindicated as she’d done nothing wrong.”

Ciharan appreciated the moral support of her firm during the trial. Most of the attorneys and clerks were present for her opening argument and for her closing, too. “I was so much in my element to be advocating for this woman with so many from the office supporting me. She was the ideal client.”

That ideal client was Bonita Milem, who has nothing but admiration for Ciharan.

“I really loved the way she handled my case and the concern she gave me after the case was over, making sure I made it back to Memphis OK. The case took 2½ years. I got updates each month. That was thoughtful, and she made me feel very comfortable in Chicago for the week of the trial.

“I really truly, truly enjoyed working with her, enjoyed the outcome and think she’s a blessing. She really needs to be made a partner of the company because she’s good,” Milem says.

Even the opposing counsel in that case, John Prusik, sings Ciharan’s praises during the week-long trial.

“She was my opponent, representing the plaintiff. She did an excellent job. She’s thoroughly professional and very polite, but she knows the law. And when she has to be aggressive, she’ll be aggressive. She was fun to have as an opponent because she’s very honest and straightforward and does her job. I give her five stars. She’s a terrific lawyer and a terrific person. She’s doing it all.”

EMPATHIZING WITH INJURED CLIENTS

“Clients are at their absolute bottom when they come to us, so we strive to recover as much as possible,” says Ciharan. “They’re never going to get their entire life back, so the least we can do is to return them to some sense of normalcy via financial security that gives them (access to) the treatment they need and that eases concerns about how to pay for it.”

Her favorite part of her practice is sitting

with clients, not disrupted by the hustle and bustle, and listening to how their injuries impact the smallest part of their lives and why they can no longer do certain aspects of their jobs.

“I was born a plaintiff’s attorney. I couldn’t do defense since I’d empathize too much (for the injured plaintiff).”

Ciharan also serves as director of the Sunday school program at her church. She spearheads activities, creates religious and folklore curriculums, and organizes events for around 70 kids aged three to 14. She enjoys using her skills and leadership to impart her faith and her Romanian traditions.

“Sometimes, it can feel like a part-time job,” she says. “But I have so much passion to teach our faith and culture and be a good role model for these children, including my own.”

Coming from a middle-class family with hardworking parents, she understands how much it means to clients from a similar background to miss weeks or even months of work. She says empathizing and appreciating every loss each client has and trying to put herself in their shoes enables her to be the best advocate possible.

“In experiencing all of the struggles and sacrifices of coming to America and building a future here, my parents always harped on the importance of being an honest, hard-working individual, and to treat all individuals respectfully and honorably, irrespective of their financial status,” Ciharan says.

“They’d always share that, ‘Money cannot buy you a good reputation. A reputation takes a lifetime to earn and moments to lose!’”

Living by that motto, Ciharan treats each client with the respect they deserve. “I value character over money and hard work over entitlement. My parents sacrificed their lives to bring us to this country, and we were fortunate to have the help of Senator John Glenn. Like his generous help for our family, it’s my responsibility to fight for our clients who have endured so many losses and struggles due to the carelessness of another.

“I’ve worked diligently in my career to cultivate an impressive reputation and am privileged to be at a firm that shares the same noble values regarding having an honorable reputation and striving to seek ultimate client satisfaction.”

“She does incredible preparation and is very creative and technologically savvy in terms of her various presentations to the jury,” says Novak.

“All that aside, she’s a great person and fun to be around. Everybody in the firm loves whatever interaction they have with Lisa. She has it all going for her. She really is an emerging star.” ■