

Pioneering lawyer Becker dies

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Gary Becker, a trailblazer in lawyer advertising in Louisville who dominated the airways long before there was a “Hammer,” a “Tiger” or a “Colonel,” has died. He was 79.

Becker was immortalized by radio personality Terry Meiners as “Gary Bicker,” a parody of an archetypal ambulance-chasing lawyer.

But Becker’s dignified and professional appearance in television spots profoundly changed the way the public – and other lawyers – viewed lawyer advertising, attorneys said this week.

“He was a pioneer in pushing for lawyer advertising and many lawyers in Louisville and the region have followed his lead,” said Kentucky Bar Association President Doug Ballantine.

Investing hundreds of thousands of dollars per year into marketing, he joined the ranks of sausage maker Al Purnell and auto dealer Bob Montgomery in the pantheon of self-promoting local businessmen, the Courier Journal wrote about Becker in a 1993 profile.

But his ads were the antithesis of the loud and obnoxious lawyer commercials that came before him, which featured cars crashing at intersections as sirens howled in the background, said trial attorney Gary Weiss.

“His ads were in many ways helpful in people finding lawyers,” Weiss said.

Becker ran the Becker Law Firm for 20 years before selling it in 2004 and moving to Santa Barbara, California, where he died at home on June 21, according to his family.

He had suffered a stroke a few years ago, according to Kevin Renfro, who bought the firm and still runs it under Becker’s name.

In an interview, Renfro said Becker was the first attorney in Louisville to advertise for personal injury cases, and that his ads alerted “regular people” that they could afford a lawyer because the firm didn’t get paid unless they did.

“He was very interested in the little guy getting a level playing field against the rich and powerful,” Renfro said.

Unlike some attorneys who advertise, Becker would try a case. He was a respected trial lawyer in his native Tell



Gary Becker FAMILY PHOTO

City, Indiana, until 1985, when he moved to Louisville, in part to further his wife, Mary’s, budding career as a financial planner. He interviewed for jobs at Wyatt Tarrant & Combs and other firms, but after finding no place for a “mature” attorney, he launched his own practice.

Employing the latest in computer software, he engineered an assembly-line approach to civil justice in which everything was done according to the book — an office manual he wrote.

“I don’t believe that stuff about the majesty of the law,” Becker said in 1993. “We try to serve clients and get the job done.”

Cara Stigger, who worked for him and now advertises her own services as “The Tiger,” said attorneys looked down on advertising when Becker started.

“Today, thanks in part to Gary, advertising is accepted and important for all areas of law,” she said.

He also was hailed by attorney Darryl Isaacs (“The Hammer”) for taking a risk, and by Karl Truman (“The Colonel”), who added, “He was a class act who pushed to open the accessibility of legal services to everyone.”

In an early commercial still available on YouTube, an off-camera voice asks, “Hey Gary Becker, why should I make a claim? Too many people are already making claims.”

Becker, sitting behind his desk, intones, “Actually, personal injury claims account for less than 1 percent of all court filings. And every time we help a client recover for a loss, it also forces the negligent party to pay more attention to safety.”

Leaning forward in his chair, as if to get closer to viewers, Becker adds, “If we really are going to change this country,

we need to make sure people are held accountable for their behavior.”

Not all of his marketing was so restrained or serious. His ad agency once mounted a wrecked car on billboard along Interstate 65 with a male mannequin helping a female mannequin from the wreckage. His newsletter once cautioned that that even ordinary cosmetics can be dangerous. “Imagine losing your sight because of mascara!” one article warned.

And borrowing sales incentives one might find at a Tupperware convention, he gave paralegals who helped settle the most cases perks such as rental of a hot tub for two.

Meiners said in an email last week that he parodied Becker because he was so ubiquitous on TV.

Meiners said his favorite was a bit in which “Bicker” claimed he made a potato chip company pay \$1 million to a woman who was able to limit herself to just one chip — and hated it. After Bicker took his cut, the parody went, she was left with \$9 and a bag of pretzels.

Meiners said he eventually met Becker at a church service and he “smothered me with kindness through clenched teeth.”

Becker acknowledged the parody “confirmed his status as a celebrity, a position that his competitors feverishly craved,” Meiners said.

Besides the law, Becker was devoted to social justice, including JustFaith Ministries in Louisville, which describes itself as dedicated to the “community of care and vitality;” and Fonkoze USA, a micro-finance and literacy program that serves the poor in Haiti. Becker also was an ordained deacon at the Catholic Church of the Epiphany in Louisville and a member of Human Rights Watch’s Santa Barbara Committee.

“He loved good food, parties, arts and culture,” his family said in an obituary published in the Santa Barbara News-Press. “And he lived a radically examined life, increasingly devoted to the spirit.”

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