

High-Stakes Lawyering

Representing the Richest Man in the World



Steven Selsberg, JD '86, has made a name for himself litigating high-stakes cases for clients such as billionaire Carlos Slim Helú and tobacco giant Philip Morris. Serendipity also has played a role, as a business connection between the man whom *Forbes* lists as the “richest man in the world” and the tobacco company led to Selsberg’s expanded client list.



ROBERT SEALE

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HONESTY AND STRONG PERSONAL relations work wonders toward client retention, whether your client’s the richest man in the world or a large tobacco company facing major litigation. “Trust is a big part of it and gains you a lot of referrals,” says Steven Selsberg, now a partner in the Houston office of mega-firm Sidley Austin LLP.

Getting good results and being at the right place at the right time also help—both of which Selsberg has capitalized upon. “After I graduated from Washington University, I moved to Houston to clerk for a federal judge,” says Selsberg. He ended up staying in Houston working for a local firm that was handling tobacco litigation for Philip Morris.

“Carlos Slim Helú was on the board of Philip Morris because he was an owner of the Marlboro franchise in Mexico,” Selsberg recalls. “Separately, he had just purchased the CompUSA superstores, and a group of Dallas businessmen sued him, claiming he had defrauded them out of their rights to open CompUSA stores in Mexico. The jury returned a verdict against him for \$450 million.”

Helú then called the Philip Morris general counsel asking to recommend a lawyer to handle the appeal. Selsberg was one of two he suggested.

“AT THE TIME—in 2001—even though I was more of a trial court guy, I was doing a lot of appellate work for Philip Morris,” he says. “I flew to Dallas to meet Carlos Slim Helú and his son-in-law, and they hired me to handle the appeal.

“Then, just a couple weeks later, Carlos Slim Helú and four of his companies got sued in Houston over an Internet deal that had gone south,” he continues. “So I represented them there as well. We did really well in that case, and we zeroed-out the CompUSA appeal, the plaintiff getting nothing.”

And that, says Selsberg, was the beginning of a fantastic relationship. Over the ensuing years he has solidified that relationship, sharing with Helú a passion for baseball and for winning in court. The latter includes Selsberg recently turning back a \$950 million lawsuit by an Ecuadorian telecommunications company against Helú and his America Movil SAB, Latin America’s largest wireless carrier.

Selsberg’s client list is now almost exclusively Latin American. He has represented Grupo Carso, Telefonos de Mexico, Condumex, Grupo Sanborns, Banco Inbursa, Grupo Pegaso, Grupo Mexico, ICA, and others in numerous litigation matters throughout the United States. He also has represented Cardinal Norberto Rivera in clergy litigation in Los Angeles.

Selsberg attributes his success in large part to his law school training and his determination never to be “out-lawyered.”

“When the lawsuit lands on your desk, the facts are already made,” he says. “The dispute presents itself to you with certain witnesses, certain documents, and the applicable law.

“My job is to try to find a way to win, if there is one, or just to learn all the strengths and weaknesses of the case so that we can get the best result,” adds Selsberg. “At the end of the day, you’re not going to win every single case, but if I hold myself to the standard of not being out-lawyered by the other side, I feel like I’ve done my job.”

THAT REQUIRES HARD WORK, determination, and preparation, he says, which is where his Washington University training has paid off.

“Whether or not you’re going to be successful in your law practice is dependent on your skill set and your effort,” he says. “When I came to Houston, I felt very prepared because I had a superior education at Washington University.”

Selsberg says that the demanding professors, bright students, and balance between “the nuts and bolts of what you need to practice and the academic side of the law” worked in concert to give him “a great education.” He says he maintains a strong sense of loyalty to the university and notes that his sister, Julie Selsberg, graduated from the law school in 1995 and his son, Jared, is a current undergraduate at the university.

Selsberg continues to learn about law and life, including lessons from Helú. “I’ve been inspired by the fact that as wealthy and as famous as he is, that he has such a close relationship with his family and his children—and that they are humble and grounded,” Selsberg says. “So I’ve tried to emulate that. I make spending time with my wife and children a priority, and try to stay very humble and low key. I learned that from Carlos Slim Helú.” ■■■