



Trial lawyer gives \$50M to Drexel law school

By MaryClaire Dale
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PHILADELPHIA (AP) — Philadelphia lawyer Thomas R. Kline has amassed a fortune during a long career representing people harmed in unusual, and unusually tragic, ways.

His clients include the family of a kindergartener killed by a falling cafeteria table, a 4-year-old who lost a foot on a subway escalator, a young woman killed when a pier collapsed into the Delaware River, and countless people injured by medical mistakes.

The dressmaker's son from a small Pennsylvania coal town is now taking on another cause close to his heart. Kline has pledged \$50 million to Drexel University for the law school that will soon bear his name.

"I don't focus on the money," Kline said Wednesday at his penthouse office. "I hope the focus on the gift is on what it will be able to accomplish."

Kline's gift includes a historic, if long-neglected, bank building on a gentrifying retail block downtown. The Beneficial Savings Fund Society Building was built in 1916 by architect Horace Trumbauer, who also built the Philadelphia Free Library.

Kline plans to restore the grand building to a trial advocacy center for the law school, complete with a mock courtroom in the soaring first floor.

"I fell in love with it, and decided it had to be saved," Kline said.

Drexel's law school opened in 2006 and was named for alumnus Earle Mack in 2008 after he pledged \$15 million. His name was dropped last year after officials decided the program needed a stronger foundation. The law school now has more than 400 students.

"I think this gives us an opportunity to put this relatively new law school on firm financial footing, in particular to establish it as a real force for trial advocacy," Drexel President John A. Fry said of Kline's gift.

Kline, a Drexel trustee, attended law school at Duquesne University, one stint in a lifetime spent in Pennsylvania. Kline, 66, was raised in Hazleton, went to Albright College in Reading, earned a master's degree in history at Lehigh University in Bethlehem, and worked as a middle school history teacher in Hazleton and a lawyer in Pottsville before settling in Philadelphia in 1980. He leads a powerhouse law firm with Shanin Specter, the son of the late Sen. Arlen Specter. Five lawyers in the firm also have medical degrees.

"He's an amazing storyteller. The jury hangs on every word he says," said former Legal Intelligencer Shannon Duffy, who covered Philadelphia courts for 23 years. "He could get them to focus on the story of his client, and what happened to him. It's very personal."

Kline's mentor, Philadelphia courtroom great James Beasley, and his wife, Paula, a teacher, both died 10 years ago. His wife and both parents died of cancer.

"We all have tragedy in our life. Life is that kind of journey," said Kline, whose damage awards include \$51 million in the Southeastern Pennsylvania Transportation Authority escalator case (later reduced to \$7.6 million) and \$10 million in the kindergartener's death.

More important, he said, are the institutional reforms that followed many of the verdicts, including the SEPTA case.

"I've represented many clients who have had (misdiagnoses) which have left them paralyzed, and left them blind, and left them brain damaged, and even deaf. The civil justice system allows a person to seek compensation," he said. "But along the way ... it also provides a learning experience to those who may have failed another human being."