

# LAWDRAGON

## One Man, One Law, One Hell of a Fight: 50 Years of Practice with Steve Yerrid



*Yerrid, one of the Dream Team lawyers who brought Big Tobacco to its knees, is part of the effort to save the rhino population in Africa.*

*By Meghan Hemingway*

In 2025, 50 years into a courtroom career defined by seismic verdicts and high-stakes showdowns, Steve Yerrid did what he's always done best: he won – and he made it matter.

Yerrid, alongside trial partner David Dickey, represented the grieving parents of a 23-year-old woman whose life was cut tragically short due to the alleged negligence of two hospitalists. Discharged from a major trauma center and transferred to a long-term facility, her severe erosive gastritis was undiagnosed and untreated by the hospitalists who were in charge of her subsequent care. Her condition deteriorated, her

gastrointestinal wall perforated, septic shock set in – and she lost her young life. The defendants refused to offer a single dollar in settlement.

Yerrid took them to trial, held their feet to the fire – and made them accountable. The jury delivered a \$30M verdict for non-economic damages and a courtroom win became a public reckoning. And for her parents, who lost their only daughter, it was finally an end to their quest for justice.

That's the thing about Steve Yerrid. He doesn't just try cases – he changes the conversation.

For more than five decades, Yerrid's resume has read more like a history of successful courtroom warfare. He first captured national attention in 1980, defending Captain John Lerro – the man universally blamed for one of Florida's deadliest maritime disasters.

A massive freighter, caught in a sudden and unpredicted storm packing hurricane-force winds, was blown off course and struck the main support pier of Tampa Bay's mammoth Sunshine Skyway Bridge, killing 35 innocent people. Despite widespread belief that the case was unwinnable, Yerrid successfully represented Lerro, utilizing an "Act of God" defense and securing a total exoneration. The case not only reshaped how catastrophic negligence is litigated – it changed how bridges are designed and built around the world.

Yerrid's pursuit of justice is deeply personal. Raised by a single mother, he learned early on the value of resilience – and the moral duty to stand up for those who can't stand up for themselves. From the beginning of his legendary career, he's been driven by a fierce commitment to giving voice to the voiceless. And when others see a case as "unwinnable," Yerrid sees a call to action.

In the late '90s, during the landmark tobacco litigation, Yerrid was catapulted to national prominence. Appointed by Governor Lawton Chiles as the youngest member of Florida's elite legal "Dream Team," he helped orchestrate a \$17B takedown of Big Tobacco – at the time, the largest monetary settlement in U.S. history. But it wasn't just about the money. The deal banned cartoon mascots like Joe Camel and the Marlboro men, removed cigarette vending machines, outlawed billboards, and funded the Truth Campaign – thereby launching a national movement that's saved millions of lives.

"That ranks right up there with the best things I've done as a lawyer," says Yerrid, who is a Lawdragon Legend and a member of the Lawdragon Hall of Fame. "To finally give victims the power to fight back against an industry that had never lost – what a great feeling."

When it comes to fighting back, few personal cases carry more weight than Allan Navarro's. The former pro basketball player walked into a Florida ER in 2000 showing clear signs of an ongoing stroke. Instead, a Physician's Assistant misdiagnosed him as having sinusitis and sent him home. By morning, Navarro was a quadriplegic.

Yerrid, alongside his close friend and co-counsel Rich Gilbert, took the case to trial and won a \$217M verdict – the largest medical malpractice judgment in Florida's history. The impact went far beyond the jury's verdict: Hospitals across the country reformed emergency room care policies to prevent similar tragedies and require an MD to be involved before a patient is discharged.

From wrongful death and catastrophic injury to corporate deception and institutional failure, Yerrid's career has been a relentless pursuit of accountability. He doesn't do it for headlines – though he's earned plenty. He does it for the people who've been told they don't stand a chance.

Just try telling Steve Yerrid it can't be done.



*Yerrid has represented hundreds of clients in his career. "I don't think I've had one who didn't inspire me in some way," he says.*

**Lawdragon:** Congratulations on your recent victory for Chad Gerlaugh. Can you tell us about this win and what it will mean for him?

**Steve Yerrid:** Thank you. The settlement is confidential so I can't tell you how much, but neither he nor his family and likely the next few generations will ever have to worry about money. Chad became paralyzed at the young age of 20 after a car accident. He was a passenger when he broke his back and lost the use of his legs. Years later, after visiting a large hospital for an outpatient procedure for a recurrent problem of kidney stones, he parked his handicap-equipped vehicle in the hospital lot. He planned on driving home, but he never left the hospital. Nor did he ever drive his car again. Instead, he became septic and while hospitalized, went into septic shock.

After a battle for his life and weeks in the hospital, he was transported to another facility until the extent of his injuries could be determined. It was two very long weeks before the surgeons would know how much

of his limbs would be lost and the extent of the amputations needed. During that time, Chad had to wait and watch as his arms and legs blackened and the dead limbs moved closer to his torso. Ultimately, he lost most of both arms and legs. Truly horrific and yet, Chad chose to make the tragedy into his inspiration. His courage, his perseverance, his ability to take a terrible situation and turn it into something meaningful – it was

extraordinary. He now helps others living with paralysis, or in a quadriplegic condition. He tells his story and speaks to what he can do rather than what he can't.

Of course we were very pleased to obtain such a favorable result for him – the kind of outcome that truly changes lives. He now has a top-tier and fully funded life care plan to ensure he gets the best of care. He says one day he's going to go back to the fishing life he loved so much. I hope so. He has already used some of his settlement money to construct a large lake near his parents' house, bought them a home, along with a new truck for his dad, and an SUV for his mom. His parents are salt of the earth, country folks with real values – they quit their jobs and took shifts giving him 24/7 care. That's love. That's family. Thankfully, they don't have to worry about money anymore. More importantly, he's in a position to give back in a significant way. He's not focused on being a victim. He's focused on helping others and, in my opinion, being an inspiration to many injured people who so much need it.

That's what made him such a remarkable client. Not, "What can I get out of this?" but "How can I make sure no one else goes through what I did?" He helps people in his condition by telling them how he learned to drive again, how he used his handicapped vehicle to hold down a job and run errands for his family. He figured all that out as a paraplegic – and now, as a quadriplegic, he's still got the best attitude of almost any client I've ever represented. Somehow, some way, I know he is going to succeed in finding happiness. He's just a tremendous human being.

**LD:** That's incredible.

**SY:** Our clients are more than just clients – they become a part of our firm and professional family. I still have clients calling me from when I was a young lawyer. That's a compliment I really appreciate. When people have faith in you and put total trust in your abilities, it is an amazing feeling.

**LD:** Well earned – you've been practicing law for 50 years. And outside of individual clients, can we talk about the impact you've had in resetting broad societal standards?

**SY:** Certainly. I've been very fortunate to have over 330 verdicts and settlements of a million dollars or more. Some of those include eight or nine figure results. We got a \$17B settlement for the tobacco case alone. We had a team of 11 of the very best of trial lawyers – the media called us the "Dream Team." We were able to finally impact and greatly reduce the deadly impact of cigarette smoking! Before our case, 400,000 people a year were dying of nicotine addiction and its terrible effects causing cardiovascular problems, lung disease and many related illnesses. In addition to the money recovered from Big Tobacco's profits, we took away much of their advertising, eliminated Joe Camel, the Marlboro man, sports sponsorships vending machines where anybody could go put two quarters and buy a pack of cigarettes. Those things are gone forever. We took out the cigarette cartel's billboards from around schools, and we stopped the industry's pandering to our children. We made Big Tobacco pay for a program called the

Truth Campaign, giving people the reality of nicotine addiction. Over the last 25 years, these programs have flourished around the country and greatly helped in stopping potential smokers before they picked up a death addiction.

After Florida's settlement, its benefits went across the nation, largely because we uncovered and made public the infamous "smoking gun" documents that were so terribly incriminating. When we obtained these critical advertising concessions, Florida's settlement included what's called a Most-Favored Nation (MFN) clause. That meant whatever concessions we obtained, any subsequent settling party got the same favorable concessions. Shortly after Florida's settlement, a national multi-million-dollar settlement occurred with every state in the country benefiting. Our ripple turned into a wave, the wave turned into a tsunami, and as a result, now after 26 years – it's not hundreds of thousands of people that have been saved, it's millions. That is a remarkable accomplishment. The result is among the best things I have ever accomplished as a lawyer. No one thought we could win, yet we did. We took the giant cigarette cartel down and slayed the giant.

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**LD:** Incredible. And it's not the only massive legal precedent you've set. You've handled cases that have driven the implementation of preventative safety measures, and made lasting change in major industries. Like the BP oil spill.

**SY:** I was so fortunate to get my hometown the largest settlement of any city in the BP oil disaster – nearly \$28M for the City of Tampa. We also stopped BP's narrative and erroneous propaganda that no significant ecological harm was done. On the contrary, we vividly demonstrated the huge impact upon our environment and, as a result, the oil industry instituted safer methodologies.

Not being a young lawyer anymore, I still continue to select cases that make a real difference both to the clients as well as our society. I keep our firm caseload modest because we want our clients to truly know their lawyers. Big is not better and practicing law is much more than a business, it is a relationship. By the time our clients' cases reach closure – and certainly after – those special people remain a part of us. Whether we are dealing with a president of a Fortune 500 company or a day laborer, each gets exactly the same treatment. I've been so fortunate in being able to focus on cases that not only help our clients – which is always the priority – but also matters that push for broader impact and benefit to others.

**LD:** What are your thoughts on the role of plaintiff lawyers in today's justice system?

**SY:** Today's trial lawyers are more critical than ever. With society being squeezed by injustice, inequality and power over truth, the words carved into the Supreme Court –

“Equal Justice Under Law” – have never mattered more than right now.

In my opinion, trial lawyers, along with a fair and honest judiciary, are the last line of defense to the very survival of our democracy. We’re the ones who can still level the playing field, against power and money, even as trials become more infrequent and legislatures across the country seek to eliminate juries. We’re facing a coordinated effort by ultra conservative judges to weaken the tort system and suppress large verdicts. The playing field is slanted – but like Jedi warriors, we are determined to fight against the dark side and we do not plan on losing.

Right now, it seems as though some people are afraid of speaking the truth because of intimidation or concern about retribution – I’m not. I think what’s going on in Washington is ridiculous, and I’m not talking about any one party or one person. I just think with the nasty and hate filled politics of today, the America we all love is being left behind. We elect people in this country that pass absurd laws in misguided efforts to further political interests and lessen and restrict the rights of others to access justice, instead of working for *all* Americans not just one side or the other. That’s wrong. Everyone should have a shot at justice – *everyone*.

**LD:** Tell us about your efforts to help save the rhinos in Africa.

**SY:** There are far too few of these majestic creatures left worldwide. The number is a few thousand. In fact, all that is left of one species, the Northern White Rhino, is a mother and her calf, that’s all that remains in the entire world. Scientists are still trying to find a way to inseminate the female to save that species. I got involved through a friend who organizes major charity events around the world. I helped sponsor one featuring Tom Brady and Rob Gronkowski for the cancer kids. She was from South Africa, and told me about what was happening with the rhino population in general. They’re awesome animals and now they’re being slaughtered for the profit their horns bring. I’d seen rhinos in a zoo, but I had never touched one – until this epic adventure.

**“ I can’t think of a single case that didn’t make me better – not just as a lawyer, but as a person. These weren’t just wins for my clients. They were wins for justice, for right over might.**

I was part of a team that tranquilized a pregnant rhino to give her antibiotics and fit her with a tracking device. One of the top rhino vets in the world was running the show. The goal was to monitor her closely in case anything went wrong during pregnancy and delivery. It was an unforgettable experience. This critically important work is being done by a wealthy South African who has established a private reserve protected by former American special force soldiers – many are PTSD survivors. Caring for these animals in that environment is therapeutic for these heroic warriors, and they take their role very seriously. The operation is extremely well-run. Not only because of the soldiers utilized

but also by enlisting the support of nearby villages who he supplies with food, electricity and clean water. In return, those communities act as anti-poaching buffers on the outer areas surrounding the preserve itself. The model works – they’ve had zero poaching incidents in the years the project has been operating.

Of course, I believe we have a duty not only to each other but also to help protect the other life forms on our planet. We have an obligation to preserve these precious treasures for future generations to enjoy. If my grandchildren can one day see a rhino in the wild, untouched and thriving, that’s a legacy I believe is worth fighting for.

You never know how one seemingly small effort can grow outward in magnitude. Throughout the years, trial lawyers have sparked massive changes in society – our profession has been instrumental in making seat belts and airbags standard equipment in vehicles. I can still remember what it was like driving cars with metal dashboards and no safety features. Now we have safer cars, electric vehicles, and the future of even safer transportation is ahead.

**LD:** Another impactful case you handled is the Skyway Bridge case in Tampa. What are your reflections on that one?

**SY:** Well, I was about thirty years old at the time and everyone thought I was going to lose. I mean everyone... Except for my wonderful dear mother who kept telling me I could win the case. Frankly, I am not certain she even really believed that would be the outcome.

On May 9, 1980, a 608’ freighter got caught in hurricane-force winds and hit the main support pier of the massive structure of the bridge – 1,200 feet collapsed, 35 people died. Everyone blamed the pilot, John Lerro. I utilized an “Act of God” defense – meaning nothing humanly possible could have been done to change the course of events or the outcome. Against all odds, we won. At the time, The State of Florida wanted to simply rebuild the damaged bridge – same design, no fenders, no proper protections, because it was cheaper to do. Fortunately, Lerro, me, our beloved late Governor Bob Graham, and many others, fought for a new bridge with better design and safeguards. As a result, today, we have a magnificent, well-protected bridge – one of the best, and safest, in the world. In fact, it has become a global template for safe design and bridge construction around the world.

You don’t hear about bridges collapsing like that very often anymore because most of the marine construction industry learned a lesson. Tragically, the recent Baltimore Bridge disaster showed some didn’t learn. That older bridge remained unprotected, and we all saw its tragic collapse. That’s why media coverage of these types of cases matters. The publicity spotlights issues that go far beyond the courtroom. When a client gets justice and sparks systemic change – that’s what making a difference means. At the end of the day, you don’t take anything with you. It’s what you leave behind that counts.

**LD:** Absolutely.

**SY:** I got John Lerro back on the bay – his license fully restored. He was piloting for a little less than a year before a diagnosis of multiple sclerosis finally took him off the water. He was in his late thirties. He fought the disease for nearly 20 years before dying. Our friendship remained strong throughout his struggle. It was indeed an honor when I was privileged to give his eulogy.

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John had this incredible courage. When he was diagnosed with MS, he stopped focusing on himself and dedicated his time to helping others – volunteering at the Crisis Center, working the Suicide Hotline, speaking to crime victims. He'd tell them, "You're a victim, but you don't have to stay one."

John Lerro was one of the best witnesses I ever put on the stand. He inspired me. So did Chad Gerlaugh. So did Alan Navarro. Honestly, I've had hundreds of clients, and I don't think I've had one who didn't inspire me in some way. I can't think of a single case that didn't make me better – not just as a lawyer, but as a person. These weren't just wins for my clients. They were wins for justice, for right over might.

I don't represent Apple or Amazon. I represent people whose entire lives – their future, their family's future – often can hinge on the outcome of a single case. Representing a widow and her four kids, knowing that if you lose, their lives could fall apart – that's pressure. Winning and having that 1,000-pound gorilla come off their backs (and mine!) is a glorious feeling and even more – it is a huge relief. The money's nice, but the real reward is knowing you changed someone's life for the better.

Frankly, I have outlived my dreams. Truly. And I say this with candor, not modesty: Looking back I realize I've rarely succeeded without the help of others. But when I've failed? I've usually done that all by myself. That's the lesson life has taught me. We're stronger together than we ever are alone.

If I could change this current situation in our nation – really change it – I'd remind everyone we're all Americans. One great united country. One people. We need to lift each other up, not tear each other down. That's not how we have always built a better country. The way forward is not to look down on others – it's to reach down and pull them up. Maybe even higher than you. That's what I believe with all my heart, and I will believe that until the light leaves my eyes.