

## Blog

### On Cancer, the DA's Office, and Never Living Scared

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I am often asked what has made me such an effective family law trial attorney and litigator. After recently giving the question some thought, it occurs to me that there are three vital elements to my success.

Over the years, I have found that when I negotiate with other attorneys, they often tend to over-emphasize the possibility of a negative result. Certainly, skilled negotiators must take into account negative possibilities and negative outcomes. However, I find that a number of my opponents focus far too much on those possibilities; this works to my great advantage, as they often make decisions out of fear. Meanwhile, I take calculated risks that pay off more often than not. This is due at least in part to the fact that I learned long ago to try not to live scared. How did I learn this lesson? By facing and surviving cancer.

In 2004, I was diagnosed with a very serious case of malignant melanoma. The surgeon who ultimately removed the melanoma from my body opined that I had a 35 percent chance of succumbing to the disease in the near future. I accepted the diagnosis, I accepted the treatment, and I have lived since then with the possibility that the disease could return at any time. Recognizing that fact, but compartmentalizing it, has helped me to live more boldly. Certainly, in the context of a divorce, custody or support negotiation, the fact that you have an illness that is often fatal helps to put those negotiations into perspective and keeps you from negotiating scared.

Next, I think a large part of my success in matrimonial law relates to my experience as a former Assistant District Attorney. Being an ADA is a wonderful experience from all perspectives (other than remuneration). At age 25, I was given a great deal of personal responsibility which had to be exercised prudently, given the tremendous impact that I could have on the lives of others. Deciding at a young age whether you would charge someone with a crime and how severe the charges would be teaches one good judgment (or, I suppose, presents the opportunity for great failure, which is also a powerful teacher.) Of course, there is also the trial experience. Trying jury trial after jury trial and bench trial after bench trial (meaning trials without a jury) gives an attorney litigation experience that is second to none. Using the rules of evidence and learning courtroom etiquette on a daily basis has made me a very effective litigator.

The third part of my success I attribute to persistence. Not so long ago, I was in a courtroom in Bucks County and the judge questioned me in open court. "Mr. Williams, don't I recall that you played lacrosse in high school and college?" "Yes, Your Honor, I did." "Let me guess, mid-fielder?" "Yes, Your Honor." "Let me guess, center middle?" "Yes, Your Honor." "I thought so," said the judge. He went on to explain that he could see me in that position because of my perseverance and tenacity in the way I, metaphorically, put my head down and plowed through to the goal when trying a case, unafraid of body checks and slashing sticks.

Family law litigation can be brutal. It can be nasty, and mean, and personal. When I agree to represent a client, I do so with the knowledge that it will be my job to take the body blows, and that every decision will carry serious ramifications. My experience on the lacrosse field and as a prosecutor has equipped me with the tenacity and persistence to represent my clients during some of the toughest times in their lives. And while I certainly wouldn't wish a life-threatening illness on anyone, in my case, facing down cancer has helped me become the lawyer I am today, tough, experienced, and sanguine even in the face of situations that might make other attorneys run scared.

