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### PARAPLEGIC CARVES GUTSY LAW PRACTICE

**Byline:** *Jerry M. Gutlon of the News staff*

**Source:**

**Lance Richard** is one of the most respected lawyers on the Treasure Coast. STUART - Copier salesman **Lance Richard** returned to his hometown of Annapolis, Md., in June 1987, intent upon emigrating to Australia.

"I actually had a job in Sydney, and went to Washington, D.C., to get my visa," Richard said.

The University of New Hampshire graduate had spent several years selling copiers and related office equipment to Boston area businesses. Although he was a success in sales, Richard felt stymied, so the then-24-year-old was looking forward to making a drastic life change by moving halfway around the world.

Richard, who was staying with friends in Annapolis at the time, slipped out for a midnight swim one evening, diving off a dock he'd dove from "200 or 300 times over a 10-year period."

What the former college lacrosse player didn't know was that the water level had dropped dramatically during the intervening years. Richard - who won an athletic scholarship to UNH - actually dove head first into 2 feet of water and broke his neck.

"I broke my neck at the C-5, C-6 level and basically shattered all the bones in my neck, and damaged my spinal cord," Richard said, his voice matter-of-fact.

Now, 13 years later, armed with a master's degree in business administration and a law degree, Richard is one of the most respected lawyers in private practice on the Treasure Coast.

Most recently, he teamed up with noted criminal defense attorney Bob Udell to represent Nathaniel Brazill, the 13-year-old Lake Worth boy accused of shooting and killing his middle school English teacher on the last day of school.

Richard, 36, credits his parents with helping him stay focused in the wake of his life-changing accident.

"I remember having this conversation with my parents while I was in the hospital and I first woke up. I was on the respirator, and I wasn't moving my arms at that point," Richard said. "I remember my parents saying, 'You're paralyzed. You now need to be the best paralyzed person you can be and do something with your life.' ... From that point on I became very driven."

Richard's parents - both educators - encouraged him to strive to dedicate his life for the betterment of people.

"I was in a lot of advanced classes but never applied myself," he said. "My dad was a college professor and my mom was a teacher and they tried to instill that in me, but I must say that I never really applied myself until I broke my neck. When you end up in a situation and you wake up and you're on a respirator your whole world changes.

"It was at that point that I decided I could concentrate on the 1,000 things I couldn't do, or I could concentrate on the 10,000 things I could do. If I concentrated on the 1,000 things I couldn't do, I wouldn't get anywhere. I was never one to feel sorry for myself."

For an athlete who had always been in perpetual motion, Richard had to make some adjustments.

"I was paralyzed from the neck down," he said. "I can't move my fingers, but I developed movement in my arms and wrists - to a degree."

Richard has found ways to accomplish tasks that seemingly should be beyond the realm of possibility. After 10 months of rehabilitation and therapy, he started a master's degree program at the University of Maryland, then transferred to another master's program at the University of Miami.

"I always thought I might go back to school," he said. "When I broke my neck and my whole world changed I knew I'd go back to school. Once I broke my neck I knew I couldn't do that (sales) job any more. Basically, I made my mind up that I was going to get as much schooling as possible so nobody could screw with me. I figured I'm in this situation and knew I was in this situation and needed to do it."

Richard said he never fell into the trap of self pity.

"I really never said 'Why me?' until about three or four years after it happened. I was in Miami, and I was driving down the causeway, and I pulled over and just sat there and cried for about five hours.

"I really never faced that reality until that moment. I give my parents all the credit. They instilled that peace in my soul that I have right now. I probably wouldn't have had it otherwise."

After Richard earned his MBA, he decided he didn't want to pursue a career in business after all and turned to law.

By the time he graduated from law school, Richard was 30 years old. He took a job with a major Miami firm that specialized in commercial litigation and employed 175 attorneys. His good grades in law school meant extra money, but Richard wasn't happy.

After an abortive attempt to establish a private practice in California, Richard returned to Florida, hanging his shingle in Stuart. Although he initially wanted to establish his practice in Palm Beach County, his parents had a winter home in Stuart.

"I was originally going to set up shop in Palm Beach," Richard said, "but I came to Martin County instead. And here I am."

Richard has established a wide-ranging law practice, specializing in medical malpractice, disability discrimination suits, criminal defense and class-action civil-rights suits.

"I trained in criminal defense while in college, and just hated the commercial litigation I was doing, although it was very lucrative," he said. "My practice is completely above board. I won't torpedo anybody. I hate attorneys who take cases personal. I find that disgusting. That's why I like practicing here in Martin County. My counterparts are generally honorable individuals.

"Being in a situation where I am paralyzed and in a wheelchair, I am completely understanding of everybody, extremely non-judgmental, extremely open-minded. I can learn something from everybody, whether it's the bagboy at Publix or a lawyer I'm facing in court. I'm no better than anyone else."

Richard's associate, attorney Deborah Gowen, said Richard is refreshingly straightforward and honest.

"Lance is somebody who appreciates life and everything it has to offer," Gowen said. "Although he has a strong work ethic, he's not driven in the sense of a workaholic - compulsive. He relishes every aspect of his life and takes full advantage of it."

The Brazill case is the second high-profile murder case in which he's teamed up with Udell.

Udell - who described himself as "a middle-aged, Jewish street-fighter from New York City" - said Richard artfully

blends a heart for people with a backbone of steel.

"Lance doesn't suffer fools gladly," Udell said. "Nor does he have much sympathy for malingerers and complainers. But at the same time he's compassionate."

During their first trial together, the Ryan Harris case involving a contract murder, they convinced the jury to reduce the felony charge to manslaughter.

"We know each other pretty well," Richard said. "We usually don't pre-plan our trials. We'll go in and decide who the jury's responding to. A lot of the time I'll do a good portion of the jury selection, do the opening statement, and present the majority of our case.

"Bob will handle the cross-examination of the prosecution witnesses. We usually split the closing. I'll do the first part, and Bob will do the second part.

Richard said he and Udell sometimes fall into the "good cop/bad cop" routine often employed by seasoned police detectives.

Udell, a hard-bitten cynic, spoke wistfully about Richard's Midas touch before a jury.

"Juries love him. He comes off as the boy next door," said Udell. "That's his shtick. It sells. It's like Willie (Nelson's) shtick, you know, "I'm just a country boy, a sharecropper's son."

**Illustration:**

**Caption:**(color) photo by Jason Nuttle: Lance P. Richard is regarded as one of the most respected lawyers in private practice on the Treasure Coast by his colleagues.

**Chart:**