

# Paul Krentz

## Champion of Property Rights, the Injured and the Abused

by Chris Bailey

AURORA — When adults who are paid to protect and nurture children instead abuse them, such behavior can only be called betrayal. When public bodies attempt to take private property from its rightful owner without any apparent need or a willingness to pay a fair price, such behavior becomes an abuse of power.

Paul G. Krentz, a partner at **Kinnally, Flaherty, Krentz, Loran, Hodge & Masur PC** in Aurora, is more than familiar with both of those behaviors.

He helped win millions in settlements for children who were sexually abused in the 1990s by house parents at Mooseheart, a residential school/home for children that is located near Aurora. He helped stave off a fire district's attempts to take a Machesney Park home that had been in the hands of the same family for a century. He also helped win fair reparation for those whose property was taken to expand the Aurora Municipal Airport.

Krentz didn't exactly set out to become a white knight, nor does he spend all his time so engaged. About 75 percent of his cases involve personal injury law, about 15 percent are general litigation, and the final 10 percent are eminent domain. He also has extensive experience in cases involving nursing homes.

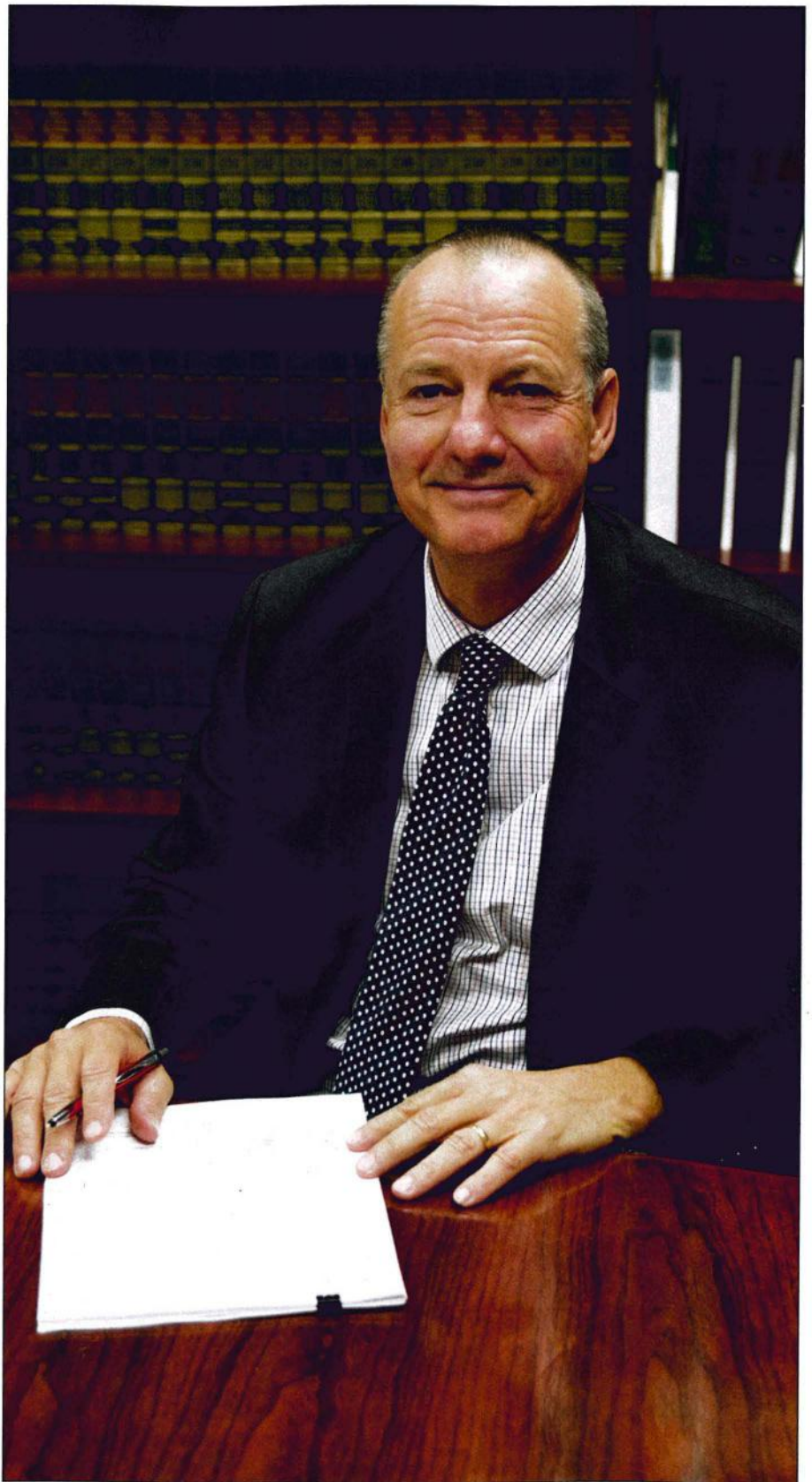
When he graduated from Plano High School, Krentz wasn't even interested in practicing law, even though it was his father's profession. He wanted to be a successful businessman and he wanted to golf, a sport at which he is especially deft. He was on the golf team at Valparaiso University in Indiana and enrolled as an accounting major.

"I played a lot of golf," says Krentz. In fact, he still does. But like many an undergrad, he found his early accounting courses decidedly dull.

"They were really boring," he says. "When others in accounting told me these were the *interesting* classes, I became an economics major. And when I figured out I couldn't get a job with an economics major, I decided to go to law school."

When he graduated from the Valparaiso University Law School, he had a ready-made mentor in his father, Peter, who was the first lawyer to hang up a shingle in the small town of Plano. He stayed for nearly 60 years.

"The town gave him a big party when he retired and put his name on one of those signs that towns put up for their famous residents," says Krentz, smiling proudly. "Within the last



10 years, he would still get the occasional letter addressed to "Lawyer, Plano."

While in law school, Krentz clerked at Reid, Ochenschlager, Murphy and Hupp in Aurora, the city in which he was born. He joined the firm as a law school grad and followed several other attorneys who left to form their own firm, the one in which he is now a partner.

"In November I found out I passed the bar exam," says Krentz. "On Nov. 16, my birthday, I was fired."

When the other attorneys gave required notice of their impending departure to set up the new firm, Krentz says, they told the existing firm Krentz was leaving with them. He was duly dumped.

"So I got off to kind of a slow start," says Krentz, chuckling.

He still considers Bill Murphy a mentor, though, saying he embraced the approach of Murphy and his father, both of whom answer their phones with "How can I help?"

Krentz's inclination to provide similar help led him to take on the abuse cases involving children at Mooseheart from 1988 to 2001 or so.

"Those stick with me," he says. "Forty different kids were abused by eight different house parents."

He and others won those children millions of dollars in settlements. And he feels the cases helped change the house parent vetting and supervision systems at Mooseheart, in part because Krentz hired a psychiatrist named John Scanlon, who had provided hiring guidance and other specific guidelines at a school for the deaf in Iowa.

"I went to him when I got involved with Mooseheart," says Krentz. "I've hired him for every case involving institutional sex abuse. I think we were able to change the system for the better over the years."

Though he knew Krentz before they opposed each other in the Mooseheart cases, there's little doubt John McTigue knew him very well by the time all the cases were settled.

"I have the highest respect for Paul," says McTigue, who says he's "almost retired" now from his private practice in Wheaton. "He's both a good guy and a good lawyer. I like him at every level and am always happy to work with him."

"I developed a strong respect for him during Mooseheart," says McTigue. "I liked his integrity, his word was good, and he didn't waste time on stupid things. He was not only honorable but cooperative. He knew what he was looking for and focused on the important issues."

### Individual Owners/Public Takers

Experience in eminent domain cases has made him something of a "go-to" guy for those individuals and businesses who face

the prospect of losing their homes, property or businesses to public entities or who are not being properly remunerated for them.

When the U.S. Supreme Court in *Kelo vs. City of New London* upheld in 2005 the right of the government to take property from one private citizen and give it to another, it put the use and potential abuse of eminent domain powers front and center across the nation. When the right of private property ownership, long a pillar of the nation's culture and economy, suddenly felt threatened, it produced a backlash. Eight state supreme courts and 43 state legislatures took action to strengthen private property rights.

Krentz says a southern Illinois case, *Southwestern Illinois Development Authority vs. National City Environmental LLC*, provided evidence that Illinois would be among those taking a dim view of emasculating private property rights. The case involved a junkyard located next to a race track. Krentz says the track basically "didn't like the land use of its neighbor." So the track owners went to a local government body and asked it to take the junkyard property using its powers of eminent domain. That government acquiesced, and the court ruled against its taking. The Illinois State Supreme Court upheld the decision.

"It was a good decision," says Krentz, who has two big fans who believe he twice produced similar good decisions for them.

In the eminent domain case of Kathy and Al Skoudas of Machesney Park, Krentz was able to twice get the case dismissed or dropped, with the North Park Fire District twice being ordered to pay most of the costs.

"Paul understood there is a big emotional impact when people are faced with possibly having their home taken away, especially when it has been in the family for more than 100 years," says Kathy Skoudas. "He also was very knowledgeable, honorable and interested."

During the four-year-long court battle, the Skoudases have missed only one hearing — an apparent indication of their commitment.

"We wanted a jury trial, despite the higher cost," says Kathy Skoudas. "I don't believe in eminent domain. But just before the case was set to start the second time, they said they didn't have the money to take the property. They had to reimburse our costs again. It was a travesty to taxpayers."

Al Skoudas says they found Krentz after an internet search.

"He was an eminent domain attorney who was highly rated, and we were really happy with our choice," says Al Skoudas. "He was very professional and kept everything low key. And we were really grateful he was able to keep our costs down."

Krentz says his representation of

landowners whose property was being taken to expand the Aurora airport was more a dispute about property valuations than anything else.

"The trial was all about the money — the low vs. high appraisals," says Krentz. He adds that the valuations were so far apart that it prompted an appellate court judge to ask "How can two appraisers come up with such diverse values?"

"There was a big, big spread in the appraisals," says Leo Cinquino, who was on the opposite side from Krentz in three of the airport cases. "He did a great job, but that doesn't mean he won them all. He won one, I won one and one was a draw. We had all kinds of different results."

"Paul is an old friend and a great lawyer," says Cinquino. "He's well-prepared, honest, knows the law and doesn't waste time on BS. With him, depositions are not a horrible struggle. He has a nice personality with the jury, and jurors appreciate that."

Cinquino, whose office is in Chicago, says he loved the airport legal experience in Kane County.

"We had great judges, great juries," says Cinquino, who sounded incredulous that "out there, jurors dress up for court."

It was fiber optic cables, not money, that earned Krentz a cool initial reception in a rural area where he was representing AT&T, which needed property takings in order to lay the cable.

"I got questioned by locals who thought we were going to push an old lady out of her home," says Krentz. He says they backed off after he assured them that wasn't the case, but he says that case taught him it was "more fun to work for the homeowners who were losing land than the big businesses taking it." And some legal cases are just no fun, win or lose. In one personal injury case, Krentz represented a 4-year-old boy who was severely injured in an accident in which his mother died. The court found the boy's mother and the other driver both partially responsible, so Krentz was able to win a \$1.25 million settlement on behalf of the brain-damaged boy, whose father cares for him at home.

"We help people," says Krentz. "We don't work for insurance companies. We represent people because we want to, not because we have to."

### Family and Golf to the Fore

When he isn't in court or at the office, Krentz can be found with his family or on the golf course.

Krentz's family includes his mother, Wanda, and his father, Peter. They raised four children

(Continued on page 233)

## KRENTZ

(Continued from page 69)

together. Krentz is the oldest, sister Anne Organ is a music director in Schaumburg, sister Cindy Krentz is a nurse in Denver, and brother Steve is a judge in Kendall County.

Krentz has two grown children of his own with his wife of 30 years, Beth, a native of Clinton, Iowa. Their son, Joe, is an architect in Singapore. Their daughter, Haley, lives in San Francisco.

Krentz says he met his wife on a blind date, where “she was apparently impressed I could spin a quarter and then stop it without flattening it,” he says, laughing. He’s far more serious when he talks about his wife’s impact on his life, though.

“She’s good for me,” he says. “She helps people. She’s a volunteer for PADS (Public Action to Deliver Shelter). She’s an aide at an autistic pre-school. She makes me want to volunteer, too.”

When he isn’t volunteering somewhere with Beth or seeing family members, Krentz can consistently be found on a golf course nearly anywhere.

McTigue says he and Krentz golf together once in a while.

“He’s a very good golfer,” says McTigue. “Oddly enough, I once spent three days golfing in Alabama, only to find myself playing behind Paul. And we weren’t even there together.”

One of Krentz’s best golfing buddies, Doug Krynicki, says they met about 14 or 15 years ago at Crest Creek Country Club in Naperville, where both are members.

“We’re pretty competitive,” says Krynicki. “He can get intense. All good golfers get upset when they don’t play well. He’s probably his own worst critic. You seek perfection, but that’s not really possible with golf.”

Krynicki and Krentz sometimes attend Chicago Blackhawks games together, but there’s little question golf is the sun around which their relationship orbits.

“We play at least twice a week,” says Krynicki. “We have Saturday and Sunday times. We have golf vacations. Just the guys. He’s been doing those vacation for 23 years with his golfing buddies from college, and I’ve been going along for five years.”

Like many passionate golfers, the group has made the near-obligatory trip to Scotland, the cradle of the sport.

“We went to Scotland, but Paul couldn’t go because he was in Singapore with his son, Joe,” says Krynicki.

Not to worry, though. Krynicki says their golf trips still remain “BFDOTY — Best Five Days Of The Year.” ■

## GRANT

(Continued from page 35)

I didn’t want to continue working for and going through the political process at other entities where no one looks like me when I can develop something on my own.”

Despite his successes and the increased number of minority attorneys and partners at firms throughout the country since he started practicing, Grant says progress hasn’t been as profound as it should be. He says it’s no coincidence that the partners and principals in most of the large firms nationwide are majority Caucasian.

“People need to understand that we still don’t live in a colorblind society,” he says. “I’ve been practicing law for 32 years and not once have I walked into a room where there were five black lawyers.”

He does what he can in the name of his race and culture in his corner of Chicago on the second floor of 230 W. Monroe St. For example, everything in the office’s main conference room “except the television and phone was created by a black person.”

Art pieces on the walls throughout the office are from the former curator of Chicago’s DuSable Museum of African American History. A sculpture from the Shona people of Zimbabwe, whose art influenced the likes of Pablo Picasso, faces the conference table. All of the furniture throughout the office was picked out by Grant’s wife, Fredericka.

“I believe in giving our people opportunities they might not get elsewhere,” he says. “Every immigrant group has had an opportunity to have their own enclaves in America, but we were the ones who were systematically separated and had our identities taken from us when we were brought over to America. People like to say that all of that that happened 200 years ago, but things haven’t changed as much as some would think.”

Grant says that, despite his proven track record of career success, he still experiences professional racism and bigotry. He tells a story of a 1997 real estate transaction in Crystal Lake, Illinois, during which the buyers refused to sit in the same room as him.

“The broker called me up the next day and apologized to me, telling me they didn’t want to be in the room with a black person,” he says. “I can go down the line with stories like this...it’s all very real.”

Grant says he consciously navigates a corporate culture in which about 70 percent of Fortune 500 company board consists of Caucasian males — 90 percent if you factor in Caucasian women.

“Since I was young, (Black Americans) have comprised 13 percent of the

population,” he says. “Latinos are ahead of us now, but corporate boards haven’t changed. When I started working as a law clerk in 1978, less than two percent of all lawyers at large law firms were Black; there have been very few gains since that time.”

“What’s worse is that there’s a more sophisticated subterfuge going on. The more you educate a bias, the more a person can disguise it. Like ‘Make America Great Again.’ When was America not great? The answer is not given because it isn’t true.”

Grant insists that pointing out America’s many hypocrisies doesn’t mean he doesn’t love the country, only that he feels the need to address its many warts.

### Building a Superior Product

Just as he gave piano lessons as a teenager, Grant has never stopped teaching. He spent three years on the Chicago-Kent College of Law faculty as an adjunct professor, he is a current member of the Practicing Law Institute faculty, and he still teaches an annual trial practice course for the Chicago Bar Association.

Overseeing the firm doesn’t keep Grant from maintaining a full caseload himself. He feels the same about practicing law as he does about playing the piano: He’ll stop when he’s pushing daisies.

“I’ve seen too many bad things happen with retired people who don’t stay active,” he says. “What will I do...sit around and drive my wife up the wall? I want to always be learning, embracing challenges, and adapting to an ever-changing society. Living things grow, and a sure sign of death is to stop growing.”

Grant’s primary goal these days is to continue building Grant Law into “a legacy that lives far longer than me,” he says. He also wants to ensure that the firm stays profitable when the next generation takes it over.

“I learned how to be profitable from many years on my own,” he says. “I do wish to grow, but I’d rather have six attorneys and be profitable instead of 10 or 15 attorneys and not be profitable.”

Ronald Austin, Jr. is likely the first in line to assume the mantle of Grant Law’s leader when Grant can no longer practice. Austin started the firm with Grant in January 2015 and is the firm’s only partner.

“He’s really driven to build this firm,” Austin says of Grant. “He wants to make sure we’re doing what we need to do not just because he wants good lawyers, but also to show that minority-owned law firms can do the type of work any other law firm can do, at or better than other firms. Doing our best and representing the best is his driving principle.” ■