

## State Bar of Texas set to honor Chandler as Legal Legend

By RHONDA OAKS/The Lufkin News | Posted: Sunday, November 16, 2014 1:00 am

Texas is full of legends. Tomorrow, it will have one more.

The Litigation Section of the State Bar of Texas is scheduled on Monday to induct Lufkin attorney George Chandler as a Texas Legal Legend at Baylor University.

Chandler is the founder and chairman of Chandler, Mathis & Zivley.

Texas Legal Legends' purpose is to memorialize the stories of many legendary lawyers who have practiced in Texas, according to information provided by the State Bar of Texas, and to use those stories to enhance the public's understanding of the historical importance of law students and lawyers to "emulate legends like Chandler by serving others and making a difference — not just a living."

Sitting in his office this week, surrounded by a lifetime of memorabilia and awards, Chandler reflected on his career that has spanned more than half a century.

Chandler said he never set out to be famous, but some of the mega-million dollar lawsuits he has won for his clients have changed industry standards worldwide.

Chandler attended Baylor University on a tennis scholarship, passing up an offer to coach high school tennis. Born in East Texas in the small town of Moscow, Chandler grew up in Orange before moving to Victoria. He decided to move to Lufkin because his dad grew up in Diboll and because his love for East Texas runs deep.

His father, O'Hara, a legend in his own right, served in the Eisenhower cabinet for education in public schools, president of the Texas State Teachers Association and taught for many years. His mother, Alma, was also a teacher. Chandler said it was their example of serving others that led him to also want to make a difference in people's lives.



George Chandler

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He traces his calling to be an attorney back to childhood when he watched local sawmill workers in Orange being taken advantage of by company store owners. He said he vowed he would help people who could not help themselves.

“I guess a lot of things influenced me to become a lawyer,” Chandler said. “I remember a trial lawyer in my town who fought for underprivileged people. My grandparents were sawmill workers and I was always concerned as a young person that it was difficult for some people to get legal representation. I became very interested in fighting for people’s rights, particularly working people.”

Chandler attended Baylor where he said he worked several jobs, and with the help of his wife Martha, the couple struggled together so that he could graduate from law school.

Chandler made the decision to be a contingency lawyer so everyone, no matter how underprivileged they might be, could have legal representation.

As his career took off, he said one man stands out who he considered his mentor.

“Ward Burke was always my hero,” Chandler said. “He gave me a job and really encouraged me to become a trial lawyer to represent injured people. I can’t overemphasize the influence that Ward had in my life. It’s the old adage that anybody can hear a sermon, but if you can see one it makes a difference. Ward lived one everyday.”

Chandler’s career was slowed down briefly when he suffered a stroke in 1966, but with Burke’s help, he said he was able to take the time to rehabilitate and come back even stronger and more motivated.

As he thought about the tough lawyers he has been paired against, he said his toughest so far has been from Lufkin.

“Without question, the best trial lawyer I ever faced was a fella named Henry Rogers over at the Zelesky firm,” Chandler said. “I have faced good trial lawyers all over America, but Henry really taught me how to try a lawsuit. He flew Flying Tigers in World War II and he tried his lawsuits just like he flew his fighter plane – with guns blazing. I never looked at our scorecard on wins and losses, but it ended up pretty close before he died.”

Chandler’s successes began to add up in the 80s and 90s and he said one of his most memorable cases was one he argued alongside his late son, Reich, who was also an accomplished attorney.

The firm won \$17 million in a product liability verdict for a 5-year-old boy and changed escalator safety industry standards internationally.

“It had the greatest impact on my life, largely because I got to try it with Reich, who I was able to practice with for several years before he died. It was a very meaningful experience,” he said.

Partnering with Kirk Mathis of Lufkin and Perry Zivley Jr., of Houston, Chandler opened a second location in The Heights in Houston and became known as Chandler Mathis & Zivley.

The Chandler firm has won jury verdicts that include the largest punitive damage award in the state of Texas in 1994 of more than \$50 million; the largest verdict in a civil case in the state of Texas in 1995 of \$143.4 million; the largest mental anguish award in a defamation case in Texas history in 1997 of \$8 million; the largest personal injury verdict in Angelina County history in 1999 of \$16.7 million; the largest civil verdict in the United States District Court, Eastern District of Texas in 1999 of \$8 million; a securities arbitration case in 2003 of more than \$27 million, and the largest verdict in Ector County history in 2004 of \$4.5 million.

Nearing 76 years old and married for 54 years, he said he and Martha have walked through a few valleys in life, but overall, life has been good. Suffering the loss of their son in 2006, they continue to celebrate his memory and enjoy life with their daughter Kelly and three grandchildren. They have attended First Baptist Church for more than 40 years.

Using a favorite hand-carved wooden walking cane with a Baylor Bear head on top to assist him to and from the courtrooms, he said he has no intention of retiring.

“As long as I can think and get over to that courthouse, I won’t retire,” he said. “There is always something going on in East Texas. We are really benefited with wonderful judges here. You don’t have to go far outside of East Texas until you find judges that just don’t care.”

Chandler teaches a Jaworsky lecture regularly at Baylor School of Law geared to young up-and-coming lawyers and said he has a word of advice for them.

“If you really care and you really try, the success will follow,” he said. “But if you are out there trying to make money as a merchant, you are in the wrong deal. You have got to care about the people and have a passion for them.”

Of the many accolades Chandler has received in his career, the Texas Trial Lawyers Distinguished Service Award is one of his most treasured.

“It’s the lifetime achievement award, you know the one they give you when they turn you out to pasture,” he said with a laugh in his voice. “I really am overwhelmed and extremely flattered that I am being recognized by the State Bar of Texas. I am no legend. I have practiced law with some legends and tried lawsuits with legends, but I feel like the mule in the Kentucky Derby — he’s not real sure why he’s there, but he sure does like it.”

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