



Kenneth Phillips, Solo Practitioner

[by Regan Morris]

Kenneth Phillips may have the most specialized legal practice in the nation; he only works on dog-bite cases and is often called the king of dog-bite law.

While studying at the University of Southern California School of Law, Phillips said he never dreamed of moving into personal injury law. He started his career as an entertainment lawyer, a logical choice for someone living in Los Angeles, his hometown.

But then his cousin was injured in a printing-press accident at his high school in 1980. As the lawyer in the family, Phillips was asked to handle his young cousin's case. Phillips won a six-figure settlement for the boy, whose hand was crushed.

That started a new career for Phillips. He said the case gave him a great sense of personal satisfaction, so he shifted his practice from entertainment law to personal injury.

Phillips, who still resides in Los Angeles, handled his first dog-bite case in the early 1990s, after a woman's nose was ripped off and eaten by a mixed-breed dog at a Christmas party.

"I realized I hadn't thought before about just how serious a dog bite could be," he said. "I mean, they are always presented in movies as being just the funniest things in the world; and in at least one Norman Rockwell painting, it's just what happens to the trouser cuff of a mailman."

Soon after winning the case involving the woman who lost her nose to the dog, Phillips took on a case involving a pit bull who mauled a woman's leg, causing serious damage. The dogs lived next door to the

woman, who was attacked as the dog owner's watched, Phillips said.

"At that point, I was very interested because I realized as I was doing my research that there had never been an attorney who came into the field of dog-bite law and studied it as a field separate from other types of tort cases," he said.

The Los Angeles Times recently called Phillips "perhaps the nation's best-known practitioner of terrier torts." His career went to the dogs full time in 1998, when he started the website www.DogBiteLaw.com

According to Phillips, the term "dog-bite law" didn't exist before he coined it. His website has attracted thousands of dog-bite victims, lawyers, and others interested in dog-bite law.

Phillips, who owns a Yorkshire terrier and says he loves dogs, only represents people seriously injured in dog-bite attacks. But he provides free legal advice on other dog-bite issues through his website. The website, he says, has been instrumental in promoting his practice. Dogs generally bite people as a result of bad owners or bad breeding. Too many owners don't take responsibility for their dogs; and that is why people get bitten, he says.

His website has attracted great media interest. Shortly after he started the site, the *Recorder* profiled Phillips in 1999. Soon after, he appeared on the *Today* show and was featured in *People Magazine*. He frequently comments on network news as a legal analyst on dog-bite cases.

"I became very well known. It led to more clients, more people coming to the dog-bite law website," he said. "They went online and saw this legal website about one topic. And when they read through the website, it was the opposite of every other legal website, because instead of it saying, 'Caution, this is not for legal advice. Go find a lawyer,' it said, 'Write to me. I'll give you legal advice for free.'"

The site is also unusual because it does not list Phillips' phone number or address. Because he wants the site to be educational first and foremost, he asks potential clients to email for more information.

The site is full of advice for victims and statistics from what Phillips calls an "epidemic" of dog bites. There are almost 5 million dog-bite victims annually, he says, with about 800,000 of those needing medical attention. One thousand people per day seek hospital treatment for dog bites, and between 15 and 20 people die from dog attacks each year. Dog-bite losses exceed \$1 billion per year, with insurance companies shelling out \$345 million of that, he says.

Phillips encouraged attorneys to be open-minded in their careers and says he is stunned how his career turned out, but couldn't be happier. Phillips says he had a biased impression of personal injury law as a young man because he believes in personal responsibility. But now he thinks personal injury law is a perfect way to encourage personal responsibility—for example, by forcing dog owners to be responsible for their pets.



Phillips started his legal career as a clerk on the California Supreme Court for Justice William P. Clark, Jr., who later served as Secretary of the Interior under President Ronald Reagan. Phillips also worked as a research assistant for legal author Melville Nimmer and in the legal department of 20th Century Fox.

Phillips compares himself to Ralph Nader and says the consumer rights activist is a personal inspiration in his life's work. Phillips says he felt obligated to give away free legal advice for dog-bite victims because too many people only saw "the Walt Disney view of dogs, when this is more the Ralph Nader view of dogs."

People needed to be warned and educated, he said. Phillips says he spends several hours a day answering questions from people across the country about dog-bite litigation and their rights. Although he only represents people bitten by dogs, Phillips wrote an e-book for people whose dogs have been attacked by another dog. It is called *What to Do if Your Dog is Injured or Killed*.

Phillips, who also gives seminars to canine professionals to teach them how to avoid liability, says many in the profession were surprised by his choice to give away legal advice. But he says the strategy worked because he is helping people and creating a reputation as the leading expert on dog-bite law.

"I liked entertainment law; it wasn't that. I just felt that I could really make a difference in personal injury and really help people," he said. "You have to find what makes you happy."