

# Cajun Lawyer On Top

**Kim Chatelain**  
*The Times Picayune*

Take away Wendell Gauthier's Rolls-Royce, his River Ridge mansion, his expensive suits and his classy colleagues, and you'd have a typical country bumpkin, complete with Cajun accent and down-home demeanor.

But even surrounded by all of the luxuries that success has brought Gauthier, he does not fit the mold of what his peers proclaim him to be — one of the most successful plaintiff attorneys in the United States.

He's real country.

He has also been called a vulture and an ambulance chaser who derives huge sums of money from the misfortunes of others. There are some who say he is more concerned with his pocketbook than his clients.

Gauthier's firm gets roughly 30 percent of the many multimillion-dollar judgments it has handled during the past several years.

Last month, a federal jury awarded Gauthier clients Christopher and Barbara Schultz \$10.9 million for



**Wendell Gauthier**

Came up from humble beginnings the losses and pain they endured after Pan Am Flight 759 crashed into their home in 1982. One of the couple's daughters was killed and another was burned severely. It was the largest aviation-related award granted by a jury in U.S. history.

Gauthier and other attorneys got about \$3 million for Robert Giancontieri, who lost his wife and three children in the crash.

He was involved in the judgments resulting from the Continental Grain elevator explosion in Westwego in 1977.

He headed a committee of 10 attorneys that represented the families of 85 people killed and more than 1,000 injured in the 19K1 MGM Hotel fire in Las

Vegas. The total settlement was more than \$100 million.

He also represented six Metairie families whose homes exploded when natural gas lines leaked in 1977.

The high-exposure cases made Gauthier's name familiar in national legal circles and gave him the opportunity to work with some of the top lawyers in the country.

"The need for plaintiff's attorneys and the success they have is a direct result of the failure of insurance companies to properly respond to the needs of the claimants," he said.

"The money I make is real nice and I like what it can buy, but I get a great deal of satisfaction knowing that my client has been awarded enough money," he said. "that's a feeling that money can't buy."

During the past four years, Gauthier said his annual take-home salary has averaged about \$400,000. But his salary should increase somewhat during the next several years as the hefty fees from recent cases start coming in.

His lavish, colonial-styled home in an exclusive section of River Ridge and the Rolls-Royce are evidence of his lofty salary.

Our democratic system promotes those who are able to do well in a particular field, and unfortunately money is usually both a means of promotion and the measurement of success," he said. "Not many lawyers make what I make, but I feel that I'm one of the most

experienced in my field and best able to handle large damage suits"

### Colleagues agree

Most lawyers agree.

"Insofar as settlement of a case, I don't know that there's anyone better in the United States," New Orleans lawyer John Cummings said.

San Francisco lawyer Melvin Bell... an author and frequent guest on the Tonight Show who has worked on a number of widely publicized trials, said Gauthier is "certainly one of the best trial attorneys I know of. He is very highly regarded, not only in your area but all over the country."

Metairie lawyer Mark Dennis said Gauthier "has been at the right place at the right time and has a good reputation as a disaster attorney. If I had someone walk into my office today with a large damage claim. I'd refer him directly to Wendell Gauthier because of his experience and reputation."

### A country background

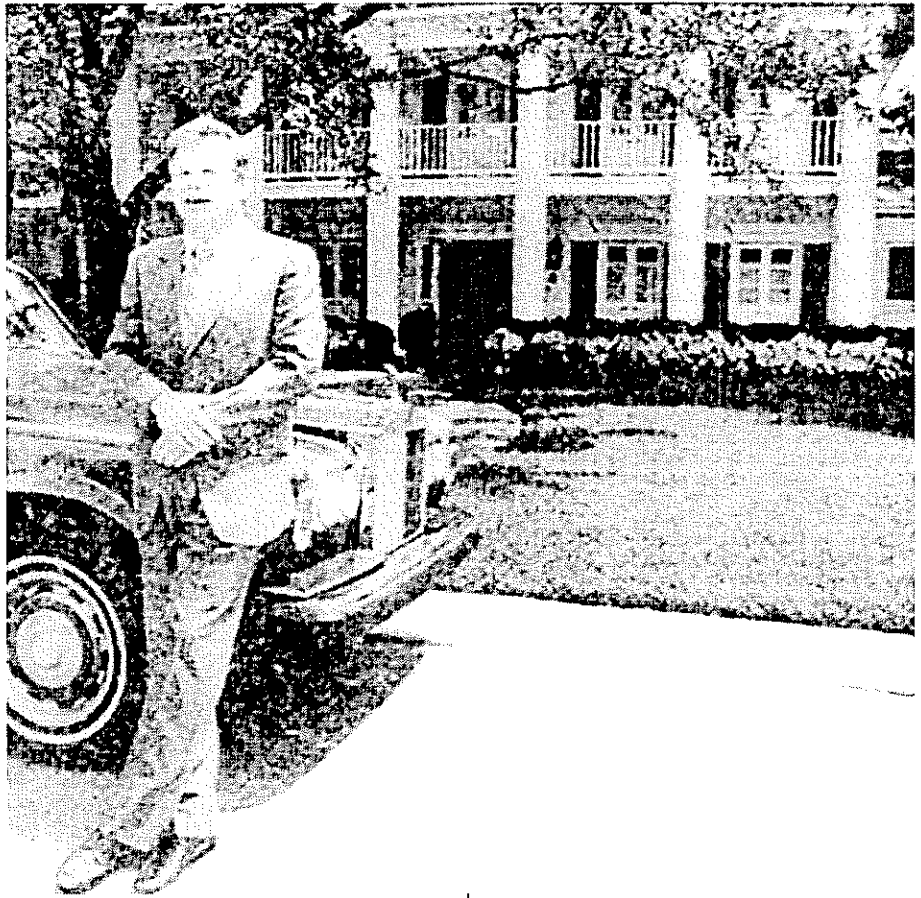
Gauthier, 41, was born in Iota, La., a speck on the map near Crowley.

"I'm really from the sticks,"

Gauthier said with a chuckle. "Half the time, we went to school with no shoes."

At 19, Gauthier enrolled at the University of Southwestern Louisiana in Lafayette. Lafayette was the largest town he had ever been in.

He met his wife, Ann, and the married after graduating together



from USL. Both were education majors.

Gauthier was an average student with a 2.1 grade point average, but his wife was an honors student with a 3.9 average.

They moved to New Orleans and applied for jobs in the Orleans Parish School System.

"They interviewed us together and I could tell they wanted to hire her, but they weren't too sure about me because of my grades and because there were others applying," he said. "I told them. Look, we come as a package. It's both or neither. Hire us both and you'll have a combined 3.0 (grade point average). They hired us both."

After teaching one semester, the Gauthiers moved back to Lafayette

so that Wendell could get a license to teach driver education.

Short on cash, they moved into the married students' dormitory which was known as Vet Village.

"It was a dump but it was dirt cheap," Gauthier said.

### Steal or starve

The residents of Vet Village had trouble feeding themselves, so a band of low renters, often led by Gauthier, would periodically raid the nearby USL farm to steal corn, cucumbers, watermelons and other food.

They would then return to Vet Village and distribute the goods.

"We were like Robin Hoods," he said, "We stole and passed it out to the poor. But I think the university

knew we were doing it and that we had to if we didn't want to starve."

In 1965, Gauthier began his law studies at Loyola University. He took night classes and taught driver education at East Jefferson High School during the day. Soon, he started his own driver education program, which he still operates at about 15 private high schools in the New Orleans area.

He graduated from law school in 1971 and started practice from a building on Jefferson Davis Parkway that he bought and renovated with the help of his family. His law practice got off to a shaky start.

"After the first six months, I had lost \$32," he said.

Gauthier represented some clients from Vacharie, La., his wife's hometown. But there was not much compensation for representing the country clients, and Gauthier was often paid in vegetables and other farm products.

He also defended a lot of struggling college students on marijuana charges. They, too, were in no position to pay legal fees.

"With me it was pay me what you can and it usually amounted to charity work," Gauthier said. "If a guy paid me \$25, I was in heaven."

### **Anxiety attack**

In the early 1970s, Gauthier represented a man who was acquitted of a violent crime. Gauthier said he realized soon afterward that his client might have been guilty.

"I felt so much anxiety I said I'd never do that kind of work again," he said. "That forced me out of criminal law."

Gauthier got his big break in 1977 when a faulty gas line caused the Reggio family's home in Metairie to explode. Gauthier was a friend of the family and got the case. He won more than \$1 million in a case that generated mounds of publicity.

Later, the gas line problems caused six more home explosions, igniting a tremendous publicity boom. Gauthier had a hand in most of the settlements and soon became known as a plaintiffs' specialist.

Gauthier said most of his clients come through referrals from other lawyers.

"Wendell is very competent and has done very well because of some of the early success he's had in some very high profile cases," New Orleans lawyer Frederick "Fritz" Bott said. Bott is a partner in the firm of Deutsch, Kerrigan and Stiles and opposed Gauthier in the Schultz case. "And his firm does a very good job. No one can say they don't do a good job."

### **Picking the right people**

Gauthier attributes much of his success to his 40-member staff and his partner, Robert Murphey, who was Gauthier's clerk when he was a poor, struggling lawyer

"All around. I'm very average,"

Gauthier said. "If I have any outstanding talent it's my ability to surround myself with capable people."

Gauthier is not an eloquent speaker and possesses a detectable Cajun accent.

I have trouble with my 'ths.'" he said.

A group of Gauthier's colleagues printed a book entitled "Gauthierisms." The book translates Gauthier's awkward phraseology into English.

While taking depositions in Minneapolis a few years ago, a fellow attorney enrolled Gauthier in an English class at the University of Minnesota as a prank. Gauthier takes it all in stride.

"They tease me about my accent and the way I mispronounce words, but it doesn't bother me," he said. "It's always done as a joke and never in an unfavorable way.

"I'm very country, but that really hasn't been a problem for me," Gauthier said.

On the wall behind the desk in his office hangs a ribbon and medal that reads, "I done real good."