

Termite attorney exterminator-proof

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Monday, July 07, 2008

In these hardbitten times, lawyer Pete Cardillo makes his living lying awake at night, trying to recall his termite trivia and making mental notes about wingspans, which is a little like counting sheep, only the sheep can't make your home collapse.

The other day, the 50-year-old termite litigator wound up in Wellington on a bugged-up condo case. As he stood on the lushly landscaped grounds examining the evidence — a foot-long stick of pitifully gnawed pine wood snatched from a condo unit's innards — he shook his head.



Bill Ingram/The Post

Pete Cardillo, the 'bug lawyer,' Tuesday in Wellington. Cardillo of Tampa, handles nothing but termite cases. He has built a practice throughout Florida. Cardillo is representing a Wellington condo in a case of termite damage against Orkin.



Bill Ingram/The Post

Pete Cardillo, holding a piece of termite-gnawed wood from a Wellington condo, took his first bug case in 1996. 'There's an industry-wide problem,' he said.

"I used to have nightmares about this stuff," said Cardillo, a Tampa-based lawyer who is, as far as anyone knows, the only lawyer in the nation who makes his living exclusively by practicing termite law. (He sues the pest control and insurance companies, not the bugs.)

"I'd dream the subterraneans had infiltrated my house and were chomping away. When I first got into this business, I was just obsessed."

And now? "I'm much better. Although I did have to refresh myself over the weekend on the difference between a flying ant and a subterranean termite that is the reproductive swarming type."

Such is the life of a bug lawyer, and Cardillo is an insectophile extraordinaire, a tunnel-visioned, pest-obsessed Columbia Law School grad who once prosecuted court-martial cases in Germany for the U.S. Army, then moved on to business litigation stateside before burrowing into the love of his life: suing the pest control companies who promise to contain termite infestation. But, he says, often don't.

And what better place to do it than in Florida, a sparkling gem in the sticky southeastern termite belt?

"Most lawyers don't know a cockroach from a jack rabbit," says Wayne Cowart, a pest control expert from Georgia who has worked on 20,000 termite cases. "But Pete's smart — he's filled a very huge need. He understands the technicalities of pest control, and once he gets his teeth in a case, he absolutely won't put it down."

Cardillo not only knows roach from rabbit, he knows subterranean from dry wood from flying ant. If, say, you are at a cocktail party and curious whether the flying ant has the narrower waist and the subterranean swarmer has the thicker — or whether it's the other way around — he's your guy.

"People tend to have a lot of questions about termites," he says. "This is why my wife doesn't like to stand next to me at parties."

When he's not reading Pest Control Magazine or visiting the Terminix or Orkin Web sites to double-check termite trivia for any one of the 41 bug cases he's handling — worth, he estimates, a potential \$40 million to \$60 million in compensatory damages — he's plotting strategy against his adversaries.

He has plenty.

"I can recite the phone numbers for Orkin's lawyers right off the top of my head," he says. "Does that tell you something?"

He took his first big bug case in 1996, settled it before he even filed a lawsuit, then took another in 1997. That one settled before trial for an undisclosed amount, and the trend continued.

By 2003, he had left the national law firm where he had been employed in the Tampa office and where he felt "a bit like a widget on a production line," and went out on his own. Bug heaven.

His cases made for enticing headlines. He got exterminating company inspectors to admit they did "drive-by" or "windshield" inspections, instead of getting out of their cars to examine properties under contract.

One former employee, Jack Cox, testified that inspection paperwork was routinely forged. "They would sit down and do it in big groups — they'd call it pizza parties," Cardillo said.

Last year, he won a \$2 million settlement in a fraud and racketeering case against Orkin, but he doesn't always win, and he doesn't sue only Orkin.

"Any company, big or small, is fair game if I think they're cheating the consumer," he says. "Right now out of 41 cases, I only have two that are Orkin. I believe there's an industry-wide problem, but some are worse than others."

Orkin spokeswoman Martha Craft is well-accustomed to commenting on Cardillo's lawsuits.

"Mr. Cardillo seems to be the only attorney in Florida who's felt the need to sue us repeatedly, typically making completely irresponsible allegations," she says, adding that "less than one-half of 1 percent of our customers have termite damage claims, and almost 100 percent of those are resolved to the customer's satisfaction."

That won't stop Cardillo, who wound up in the news once again recently when the Florida Attorney General's Office quietly ended a four-year racketeering investigation into Orkin's practices. As part of the settlement, the company admitted no wrongdoing and agreed to pay \$80,000 of the state's costs.

Cardillo was bugged. He called the settlement "namby-pamby." Then he hopped back in his silver Mini Cooper (license plate: BUG LAW) to shoot off to the next case.

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