



*I'm sort of a gladiator*

# George Spaneas

*Born:* November 21, 1972

*Where:* Attleboro, MA

*Siblings:* One brother, older

*College:* Marshall University, John Marshall Law School

*Degrees:* Psychology, Law

*Married:* No

*Job:* Trial lawyer

To me, the most remarkable thing about George Spaneas is that he looks *so* not like an attorney. Unshaven, thick dark long hair. No suit, no collared shirt even. The sole clue he's a lawyer sets on his otherwise bare desk in his office at Clauson, Atwood & Spaneas. It's the scales of justice. George does have college degrees on the wall and a couple touristy pictures of Greece and the deep-blue Mediterranean. He's soon holding up another photograph, though—this one of a man in uniform in Greece in the early 1930s—and tells me a seminal story of his family's past. It's a story in which his grandfather, for whom George is named, was killed in a vendetta, setting off a long string of events that led his parents to America and George to Vermont where he became a trial lawyer because, as he puts it, "It was just meant to be."

*Tell me about your grandfather. What happened to him?*

I've always had this very strong connection to my grandfather, though I never met him, never knew him. He was murdered when my father was an infant. There was a vendetta in his village over a piece of property that the community used to graze sheep on. One family decided that they were going to take that piece of property over and claim it as their own. So my grandfather, who was sort of the mayor or the selectman of the town, took it on himself to say, "That's not going to happen. This family's not taking over this property; it's going to stay for everybody." That was the dispute. He argued with this other family for a while; I think it got physical at some of the meetings. Nobody shot anybody, but they all carried guns. Then this family that wanted to take over the property discovered that my grandfather was going to be traveling to a neighboring town. A person from the other family hid behind a stone wall, and as my grandfather passed, he shot him in the back three or four times.

We're talking the 1930s. My father was born in 1933; my father was just a couple months old when it happened. There was like a civil war. During that time in Greece, it was very bloody. My mother grew up in a place in northern Greece; they were very poor. Her mother got murdered by militants or communists who were after her father; they couldn't capture her father, so instead they took her mother, brought her to the mountains and murdered her. My mother was raised by her grandmother.

*So there were murders on both sides of your family during your grandparents' time?*

Yes. Communism was spreading; there was a battle between communism and democracy going on. [During World War II] Greece was on the Axis side. My father remembers, as a child, seeing German soldiers walking through. Then my father and mother moved to America in the 1950s. For my mother, it was the American dream to have a better life. To raise a family in a better world, a better place.

*How did you get to Vermont?*

In 1988 my parents bought land in South Strafford. I was sixteen. I fell in love with the place. I chose Hanover High School because I met a couple kids from South Strafford at Coburn's Store in town. They played football at Hanover. I got rides with them back and forth. It was rough. I had to walk up and down essentially a mountain to go sleep where we were living until our house got built. We lived in a small camp, with an outdoor shower.

*So you played football in high school?*

Yeah. I played tailback and strong safety. Athletics were not very big in my family; football wasn't something I learned from my mother or father. When football used to come on in my house, I remember, as a kid, we used to change the channel. "What is this game . . . everybody smashing each other?"

It was just sort of accidental how I got into it. I used to walk to grade school [in Attleboro, MA], and I had a friend. We used to play before class. He was involved in a game in the parking lot and I wanted to hang around with him, so I kind of injected myself into the game. I just ran with everybody else, and as I ran, I ran really fast, and the next thing I knew there was a ball in the air and it ended up in my hands. I caught it, reached up and grabbed it. It was a touchdown and all the kids were like hugging me and slapping me high fives, and I was like, Wow, what a great feeling!

Man, I'm *good* at something. I'm fast, I can run. So I kept at it and I just started dominating. My God, I'm good at this sport! That's how I got into football. It was just like that, just accidental in the parking lot.

At Hanover High our team did well. My junior year we won seven or eight games. My senior year we made it to the state semi-finals. I don't ever remember, from the time I was eight years old and started football until the time I finished, not being on a successful football team.

*Did you play in the Shrine Game [an annual Vermont versus New Hampshire contest played by all-star players from both states]?*

Yeah. It was at Dartmouth on a natural grass field. I think we had about ten thousand spectators. The papers made a big deal about me being a Vermonter and running wild for New Hampshire because I was playing running back.

*You're not that big a guy now. Did you beef yourself up?*

Right now I'm about the size I was my senior year of high school football. I was a little shy of five foot ten, and I weighed one hundred and eighty—five pounds. Later, when I got to Marshall [University in West Virginia on a football scholarship], they wanted me to be an outside linebacker. I beefed up. I weighed like two twenty. My legs were gigantic; I was a beast.

(Shakes his head and grimaces.) Gosh, I was twenty . . . nineteen to twenty-one. You know, football was great, but I realized that it wasn't the same anymore. I didn't finish playing at Marshall. At that level it was such a business. I didn't like the philosophy, I didn't like the attitude. I played with some great people, and I made some good friends, but I didn't agree with the methods. I thought I shouldn't be squandering the rest of my two years at Marshall, giving my life to football and these coaches when I could be doing something better. And that was: Start hitting the books; start studying. Grow up and do something that's going to benefit you in the future. That's when I started applying myself academically and getting good grades and was able to get into law school. I gave up football. I'd started at eight. I loved the game. But it was time to move on.

*So you went to law school in Chicago, then what?*

(George turns solemn, stares into the air above my head). I worked for a Chicago law firm in a tall building, but didn't like it. I could not see myself living in that kind of environment every day. I wanted to come back, be closer to my family. I love Vermont. I love the beauty. There's no



place like it. I wanted to be a trial lawyer. (Shakes his head, grimaces.) Trial lawyers are almost extinct today. Cases don't go to trial. I had been interviewed with other firms before I came here and I got funny looks almost. I got discouraged. But when I came to this firm and met Bill Clausen and we talked for the first time, I told him, "Ya know, I'm kind of discouraged. I want to be a trial lawyer and I'm hearing nobody tries cases anymore; it's a thing of the past." He said, "Not with me, it isn't."

My first case for the firm was a major felony trial involving a guy whose brother I went to school with at Hanover High. His family came into the office and said, "We want you to represent him." I said, "I'm brand new; you need somebody with more experience." They said, "No, we know you, George. We want you." I was just licensed. I mean it was my first jury trial. It was huge stakes. He was charged with three felonies and a DWI [Driving While Intoxicated]. After the trial, I was drained; I was practically crying. I thought I'd let him down, I thought I did a terrible job. Before the verdict I thought I didn't know what I was doing . . . why did I agree to do this felony case? I said to myself, "I'm terrible, I shouldn't have done this." The jury came back, "Not guilty." What a way to start! I felt so emotionally drained; it was unbelievable. It was an amazing weight off my shoulders.

*Now that you're a successful trial lawyer, how do you like it?*

(Fingers together, he thinks a few moments.) I always considered myself sort of a fighter. A gladiator. That's why I liked football so much. I fell in love with football because to me it was like the only place you can still strap on armor, like the old warriors, and go do battle. You're putting everything in your heart and your soul into it. That's how I approached the game. That's sort of what I think's inside me. And I thought, Man, maybe being a trial lawyer I could use that kind of strength and passion. You're a warrior still, but you're channeling it in a different direction. Instead of using swords and being on a horse, or fighting on a field, you're fighting in a courtroom, which is the new field. These are just the kinds of ideas that I had, and I thought this might be a great way to do it, and if I could make a living doing it, even better.

I've become very busy. I've been here ten years and last year was one of my best.

*So, it's almost time for the trial . . . what do you do? How do you get centered, all your information in order?*

My last week's routine is just dress rehearsal. This is my philosophy: You need to be prepared to deliver the case a month before you're actually before the jury. My preparation is done well in advance of the trial. If I'm not just reviewing and polishing up during the last week, there is something wrong. My last few days, what I'm doing is staying pretty much to myself. I'm not doing anything big socially. I relax. I practice my opening statement, my closing argument. I say them out loud, to hear the words. I just listen to myself; I don't do it in front of a mirror. I just envision the jury sitting there and I'm talking to the jury. But you need to hear the words, how they sound when they come out of your mouth. It's one thing to write it down, but I think you need to hear the words that you're going to say.

(He laughs, leans back, fingers intertwined.) I find I'm way over prepared. Not in a bad way. When I'm in the trial, when I come out, I think, Wow, I was so well prepared for that; I probably didn't need to do that extra forty hours that I did, but I wouldn't do it any other way.

*During a trial do you speak to the jury individually? How do you act?*

It's very important that you be real. Be who you are. Be straight and honest with the jury. I've seen lawyers and their eyes quickly span back and forth across the whole jury. There's no connection. When I'm in front of a jury, the most important thing for me to let them know is that I really

care about my client and my case. If you don't care about your client and your case, you can't win. You *have* to care. If you don't care, why should they care? So I don't treat them all like a single group. I make connections with individuals when I'm talking to a jury, just like I'm talking to friends. I convey my case. I hope I have a good case . . . an honest case . . . a just case. I show that I care.

*Do you consider yourself more of an emotional, physical, or intellectual man?*

I'm definitely more emotional. In my job, my cases; in my personal life, definitely more emotional. And there are a lot of emotions. In this line of work, love is the most powerful. I think it's probably the most powerful, no matter what you do. I don't mean to sound mushy saying that, but if I'm going to a lawyer or a doctor, I want to know I'm seeing somebody who loves his work, loves his client. Will do anything for him. I've heard too many lawyers say, "Be unemotional. Don't get involved with your clients." I'm not like that.

*So you prefer a jury if you're trying to right an injustice?*

Most certainly. You can't get justice from a corporation, from an insurance company, or a judge always . . . they won't give it to you. But a jury from a community of regular people who honestly care about you, they will listen, they will see it. The jury is the great equalizer of justice. They're the ones who, in my estimation, are truly detached from the big politics, from favoring any agency or organization. A judge may be more inclined to decide [a case] based on his personal background. But the jury—you've got twelve people from the community who have *the* most power at the end of the day. They don't have to answer to no one. You cannot interrogate them; they do not have to give you a rationale for why they did what they did. When it's David and Goliath, when it's the big money against the poor guy, when it's unfair attorneys or judges who are out to get you, the jury are your friends. That's it. A just result will come.

You can't trust justice to a judge or a police officer . . . or to a single person . . . or to someone working for the government or with connections or allegiances to some group. A jury that comes in blind and blank, they're the ones, the equalizer.

*Why is it so difficult nowadays to get a jury trial if it's the most just?*

Big money benefits from prolonging a case. Insurance companies slow down the legal process, stretch it out, delay things. The status quo is foot dragging. The rules and procedural paperwork are unreal. The strategy

means it takes longer for a person to get justice. Family law is awful; everybody has a hand out and is getting paid. Mediation (shakes his head) is a waste of time. The emphasis is to resolve the case before a trial. Justice is less well served than finance. The legal maneuvers now make the money, just like the procedures in medicine. Lawyers forget their clients.

*I need to ask you my classic Vermont questions: You ever milk a cow?*

I've milked goats. My family used to have goats when we moved up here. We would milk the goats and try to make feta. (He chuckles.) All I can remember is things hanging and you're straining.

*Ever make maple syrup?*

No.

*Ever can food?*

I have friends who do it. They don't go to the grocery store, but they're older, retired. They can spend their time and energy doing that. I love going there for dinner because they go down in the basement where it's cool, and they pick out the chicken, the beef, the deer, or the moose. Vegetables? Shelves of them. I think it's awesome. I'd love to garden, raise my own food. I'd love to grow my own vegetables. I'd love to tap trees for syrup. I'd love to do all that kind of stuff. But I can't do that *and* work six days a week as a lawyer.

*Do you hunt?*

Yeah, I hunt. I hunt birds in New Hampshire. I have a .30-06, a .30-30. I have a 16-gauge shotgun. A .38 special pistol.

*Do you have a license to carry a firearm?*

In Vermont you don't need a license.

*You practice here in the Upper Valley; what percent of cases are in Vermont and what percent in New Hampshire?*

I'd say it's about fifty-fifty.

*How many times do you face a jury in a year?*

Three or four times a year. But most of my cases are civil; you're talking about money, not liberty. My last big cases were in Orange County, in the Chelsea courthouse. One was a sibling dispute over the father's will. The other was a land dispute between neighbors. Both will probably go to the Vermont Supreme Court.

*What's been your biggest case?*

A mentally-ill guy named Joseph Fortunati. A SWAT team went up in the woods and shot him. He was camping at the end of a public trail



that looked like a rough logging road, right next to his father's property. Environmental workers were in the area, trying to locate an old copper mine. They stumbled across Joseph's camp site. They asked Joseph to move his tent out of the way because they wanted to drive through there. Joseph said, "No, you're on private property; this is where I live. And you guys are lost anyway." They reported him to the State Police. The State Police knew who Joseph was; they knew he had a history of mental illness. He had some problems with the police before. Never violent. They decided, instead of sending regular troopers, to send in a SWAT team to take him into custody. They ended up killing him. In my opinion unjustifiably. The federal judge has dismissed my lawsuit. We're in the process of filing an appeal to the Second Court of Appeals in Manhattan and having our day in front of a jury.

*In your experience in Vermont, do judges usually defend law enforcement people?*

Yes. I think there are some good judges out there, there are some that aren't so good. But they all work for the government. It doesn't take me to say it; this is what other people say. If it's my word against a cop's word, isn't the judge going to believe the cop? Mostly that's true. Not always, but mostly.

The judges work for the state, the prosecutors work for the state, the police work for the state. You've got to be seen as a judge tough on crime. You can't be a weak judge. (George leans across the desk and raises his voice.) You can't be a weak judge! So people laugh at you. You can't be known as the judge who goes against the cops or doesn't give them a little bit of favoritism without bending the law too much. You just can't. It's too political. I've seen that often. Not always. The good ones don't do that. But I've seen it often.

*What about the future in Vermont? What would you like to see happen?*

I wish it wasn't so hard for people to find justice. It's getting more difficult to use the court system to get it for people. There are many times I have a case where clients aren't guilty of the crimes charged, from a DUI [Driving Under the Influence] to a serious felony case, but they eventually take a deal. Plead guilty to something lesser [than they were charged]. Pay a small fine. Don't go to jail. But still plead guilty to something under the law that they're not guilty of because they can't afford to

go to court and spend all this time and post bond and bail. So on and so forth. Economically, it's hard for people, and I wish that would change.

*Culturally, what do you do? You like music, you read?*

I certainly love women. I play the piano. I like live music. Sometimes I drive to Burlington to Higher Ground. Last time was to see Grace Potter.

Books? I'm a trial lawyer junky. I read histories of lawyers. I've read Plato on Socrates three or four times. Socrates was one of my heroes. To me, he was a trial lawyer. He always presented his position, and through rational thought and logic and argument, he presented his case. Here was a brilliant, brilliant man who never claimed to be brilliant. So smart. Intellectually powerful but very, very humble. Walked around with beat-up sandals and, I think, the same clothing. He was not beautiful in appearance. He never charged a fee. He just went out into the public and anybody who wanted to listen could listen. There was no one better. And when he had his trial, he spoke the truth. He was straight. He was principled about it. He didn't care what the consequences would be. And he was brilliant. I love reading about him.

*What about social media?*

Progress is great, but I have refused as much as I could, even being a lawyer, to get caught up in the technology boom. I don't have a cell phone. I don't have an iPod or whatever they're called . . . Blackberries . . . and these sorts of things. So, you say, "You need those things to function these days." That's true, but it's gone to such an extent . . . we've gotten fat on stuff. We're all just sort of complacent about it. And I don't like it.

*If you were to summarize the last decade of George Spaneas, trial lawyer, how would you describe it?*

I hope I've been fair, decent, and honest to people. And helped them out. I hope in the last ten years that I've done good things for people. But maybe the answer is still out there. ■