

# Miranda Soucie

## Fierce, Compassionate Advocacy for Plaintiffs in Central Illinois

by Allison Petty

CHAMPAIGN — Technically, James D. Spiros did not have an opening in his firm. In fact, he had recently hired someone.

But a University of Illinois law professor contacted him with glowing praise for Miranda L. Soucie, so she was asked if she wanted to do some legal research.

It only took one motion for Spiros to recognize that her skills were outstanding. “Based upon that one project, I thought, ‘Well, we don’t have an opening, but we need to create one.’”

Soucie’s commitment, passion and drive became evident immediately. After just two years, she was named a partner at **Spiros Law, P.C.**, a firm which focuses on personal injury, medical malpractice, workers’ compensation and nursing home abuse/neglect cases.

Spiros says it was an “easy decision” to make Soucie partner after such a relatively short time.

“Her commitment and her dedication were clear,” Spiros says. “Her fundamental skills and legal skills were all such that she’s exactly the kind of person you would want next to you in a business setting, a trial setting, in a critical decision setting.”

Soucie’s confidence and compassion continue to leave a strong impression. Other attorneys remark on her civility and dedication. Clients rave about her. Even working long hours, the 31-year-old still finds ways to give back to her community and the profession.

“I think (with) everything she touches, you just have this feeling that she’s going to be successful because she just brings that kind of energy to it,” says J. Steven Beckett, director of trial advocacy at the University of Illinois College of Law.

### Unique Connection With Clients

When clients come to Spiros Law with cases involving serious personal injury and wrongful death, they are often mired in grief, attempting to process the worst situation of their lives. Soucie’s warmth, enthusiasm and down-to-earth approach puts them at ease.

“The most consistent comment I hear is ‘We love Miranda.’ I hear that literally all the time,” Spiros says.



“When I meet with clients who have suffered a significant tragedy, whether it’s a significant injury or a loss of a loved one, in the same conversation where we’re talking about their loss, they volunteer how much they appreciate and love having become acquainted with her.”

One such client is Joy Sheehan, whose 23-year-old son, Christian, was killed in a Champaign house fire earlier this year. A family friend recommended Soucie, saying he would want his own wife to hire her if something ever happened to him.

The Sheehans took that advice and immediately felt comfortable with Soucie. She accompanied them when they entered their son’s home for the first time after the fire.

Sheehan’s 20-year-old daughter was away at the time, serving in the Navy. When she returned, Soucie obtained permission for the family to enter the house again, an effort that helped the whole family to gain closure.

“I just felt very comfortable with her,” Sheehan says. “She’s tenderhearted but at the same time, I think she’s a bulldog.”

Over the summer, Sheehan, her husband and their oldest daughter went out together to a popular restaurant in downtown Champaign. Soucie saw them and went out of her way to say hello; Sheehan was impressed by the considerate gesture.

The next morning, her inbox contained a note from Soucie, saying how nice it had been to run into the family.

“Who does that?” Sheehan says. “That extra step, that thoughtfulness, and knowing that we were trying to go somewhere as a family and just try to make ourselves do something in public where everybody knows you.”

Soucie can relate to her clients better than many of them ever know. When she was 11 and her brother was 9, their parents were killed in a car accident caused by black ice on the roadway.

As a result, Soucie knows intimately what it is like to navigate the legal system in the wake of personal tragedy. While her experiences help her understand what her clients must endure, she doesn’t share them often.

“I try to play it pretty close to the vest,” she says. “But as I’ve become more comfortable with it and my focus has been more on dealing with families that are going through that, I think it’s become easier to make that a natural part of my connection with people.

“In some instances, it has resulted in my clients, I think, being more open about things

in terms of what they’re going through.”

Every attorney brings his or her own background and experiences to the table, Spiros says. But very few lawyers share Soucie’s ability to relate to clients who are experiencing the spectrum of grief.

“We can all say that we understand what you’re going through or we’re there for you,” he says. “But she has a personal life experience almost unlike anyone else that really allows her to develop that connection from a real, genuine standpoint.”

### A Fierce But Civil Advocate

Along with compassion, Soucie brings an unflagging work ethic to each case. Spiros says he was impressed early on by her inherent understanding that the practice extends beyond 9-to-5.

Send her an email at 5 a.m., and a response will often come within minutes, he says. She always returns phone calls and messages promptly.

“This was something that she was well suited for and her life experiences prepared her for,” Spiros says. “She didn’t look at it

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as a job, and still doesn’t.”

David Bernthal, who retired in May from his position as a U.S. Magistrate Judge for the Central District of Illinois, says Soucie sincerely cares about her clients, and it shows in her meticulous preparation for each case.

Bernthal recalls an instance in which the court appointed Soucie to represent a prison inmate who alleged police mistreatment.

The judge was impressed by the level of preparation and research with which she treated the case — the same effort as if there were a large fee at stake.

Bernthal describes Soucie as warm and gracious, but says opponents should know that she won’t be pushed around.

“In an era where we are really concerned about a lack of civility in the profession, she is a good example of how you can be a fierce advocate and still be civil and pleasant and get along with people,” he says.

J. Dennis Marek of Marek, Meyer & Coghlan Ltd. has faced Soucie several times as an opponent, has referred cases to her, and has acted as an arbitrator in cases where

she represented a plaintiff.

Having experienced her skills in various settings, Marek says he is continually impressed with her street smarts and civility, especially at such a young age.

“She’s just got some basic moxie: what to say, when to say it, when to back off,” he says. “If I’ve got her on the other side, it’s gonna be a good battle.”

### Around-the-Clock Dedication

Soucie grew up in Ontario, Canada. After her parents died, she was raised by her grandparents, Adrian and Juliette Soucie, in the small town of Echo Bay.

She began participating in drum and bugle corps as a teenager, which led her to her travel around the United States and ultimately to join a corps based out of La Crosse, Wisconsin.

She attended the University of Wisconsin Milwaukee and studied theater education. Although she liked teaching, Soucie soon realized that career would not fulfill her intellectually.

The first year of law school at the University of Illinois presented challenges. A self-described “yes person” when it comes to activities, she struggled to balance a full plate and to harness her creative thinking tendencies in a more logical, organized way.

“My approach to things has always been: If I’m not achieving at the highest level, how can I get to the highest level?” she says.

She consulted with professors and other students, and worked doggedly to improve. Soucie graduated in the top 20 percent of her class and was already clerking for Spiros Law at the time.

While she never specifically planned to pursue personal injury law, Soucie always knew she wanted to handle some type of litigation rather than transactional work.

“I’m not going to sit behind a desk, day in and day out,” she says. “I wanted to get on my feet. I wanted to question people. I wanted to use my creative abilities in that way.”

Her high energy level is well-matched with Spiros Law, where she frequently travels between the firm’s Kankakee, Champaign and Danville offices. She also visits clients in cities and towns throughout the state.

When asked which office she works out of, Soucie often jokingly answers: her car.

“Practicing in Central Illinois and doing what we do almost completely necessitates the ability to travel and go where you need to be, whether it’s for a court appearance or for a deposition or a meeting with a

client,” she says.

For one of the first major cases she handled with Spiros, Soucie paid regular visits to a client in Iroquois County. The woman’s lung cancer had been misdiagnosed and left untreated for a year. By the time it was discovered, she had just six months to live.

Soucie’s task was to go to the woman’s house every couple of weeks, sit down and get to know her: what she did for a living, where she came from, the family she was leaving behind, and the struggle she faced coming to terms with her diagnosis.

The case was ultimately settled before the woman died, giving her the peace of making decisions and knowing her husband wouldn’t struggle to pay bills. She was also able to spend the money on experiences, such as buying her son a boat and flying her granddaughter to town for a photo shoot.

“She had some joy in the end,” Soucie says. “A lot of people try to say money isn’t going to change anything, but in that situation she was able to do things with and for her family that she otherwise would not have been able to do.

“So it did change things for her, and it did make a difference.”

The firm, which includes seven attorneys, treats cases with a collaborative, team-based approach. Ultimately, the goal is to provide the best representation for the client, which sometimes means involving more perspectives and skill sets.

“We are convinced that once you think you know everything, that’s probably the beginning of your demise in this business,” Spiros says.

### Looking Beyond the Numbers

Earlier this year, Soucie and Spiros reached a \$4.9 million settlement in a Vermillion County lawsuit against Furniture Row. A 33-year-old mother of two was a passenger in a vehicle that was struck by one of the company’s trucks during snowy weather conditions.

After her death, the woman’s two daughters went to live with their respective fathers, several hours apart.

Data shows that cases with male victims often draw larger settlements. The woman was a single mother and not a high-income earner, so on paper, the valuation of her settlement might not be as high.

But that didn’t sit well with Soucie, who argued in favor of the intangible damage caused by the woman’s death: the girls who lost not only their mother, but the close connection they shared with each other.

“I think we get so hyper-focused on numbers ... and what people tend to forget is we are dealing with humans. We are dealing with relationships,” she says. “And if you approach the case the right way, I think you can convince people and a jury that the economics are not as important.”

Though most cases end in settlement, Soucie doesn’t shy away from the prospect of a trial. In fact, she relishes the opportunity.

“I think you have to develop a reputation that you’re willing to do that. Otherwise you’re doing a disservice to your client,” she says. “If you’re constantly settling every case, the insurance companies are going to know that.”

Spiros recalls that Soucie’s first solo jury trial was in Will County. The judge suggested, while the motions *in limine* were being argued, that she should take the nominal settlement that had been offered.

She respectfully disagreed, feeling confident in her case, and carried it forward. The jury ultimately awarded her three times what the last offer had been.

“That’s not an easy task when you’re 26, 27 years old,” Spiros says. “She has a certain level of humility that comes with the confidence that does not bleed off into arrogance.”

### Giving Back

As if her thriving practice weren’t enough, Soucie keeps busy with a rich variety of professional and personal activities.

In August, she joined 16 women from her church on a 10-day mission trip to Malawi, a country in southeastern Africa. Copper Creek Presbyterian Church fosters an ongoing relationship with a community there.

During the course of the trip, the women met with roughly 30 high school and college students that the church sponsors through a scholarship program.

The average high school student pays between \$17 and \$20 to attend school in an area where the average family makes less than \$1 a month. The meeting focused on goal-setting and study skills.

The women also held a retreat with women from the village, which led to frank discussions of topics such as hygiene, family planning and even divorce.

“It was an eye-opening experience, just in terms of bringing two totally different worlds together, but how similar our problems are and how we can solve those,” Soucie says.

Soucie serves on the business committee for the church and volunteers with the middle school youth group. In terms of professional organizations, she serves as president of the East Central Illinois

Women Attorneys Association and is a board member of the Champaign County Bar Association.

Soucie is a fan of physical fitness. She meets a handful of friends to work out at 5:30 a.m. several days a week.

“It’s just like a little community,” she says. “There are a lot of worse ways you can relieve stress.”

She also enjoys spending time with her two dogs, a boxer mix named Barley and a three-legged pit bull named Hops. She also has two cats, Peggy (also three-legged) and Millie.

In 2014, Soucie was appointed as an adjunct professor at the University of Illinois. She is the visiting director of the trial team, which travels to competitions across the country.

Beckett, the director of trial advocacy, credits Soucie’s energy with ensuring that her team is well-prepared. Last year, they competed in the national finals in New Orleans.

“She’s infectious,” he says. “If you work with her, you want to excel because that’s sort of the attitude she carries with her.” ■