

My 7 Steps to Becoming a Warrior



Ken Levinson, August '08 7-step Graduate

Like some of you, I am a TLC “7-Stepper”. Unlike some of you, I did not attend the “full program,” the three-week TLC course. Instead, I graduated from the Trial Lawyers College by attending six Regional Seminars on each of the trial skills as well as personal psychodrama, as well as a graduate class. I am honored to be a “7 step graduate” and for me, it worked the best given my family and my practice, as well as the way I learn. In this article, I hope to share why I chose the 7-Step program, and the benefits and differences it offers. In keeping with tradition, I’m going to break it down into seven steps, setting the scene for each.

1. LOOKING FOR A BETTER WAY

My TLC journey began in early 2005 with a wrongful death case I took in Texas at the end of 2004. Naturally, I felt a tremendous responsibility to help the widow and her two young children. I had tried cases before, I had settled many more, and I had a good record. But I couldn’t tamp down that nagging feeling that there had to be a better way. I knew there had to be a different way of presenting a case—not just to the jury, but also to the defense lawyer and the judge. I wanted to know a better way to tell my client’s story.

My research ultimately led me to the TLC website. As I read through the various pages, and absorbed the information, I knew this was what I was looking for. However, I also knew that as a husband and father of two young boys (with the third rapidly approaching), and the young partner at a three-attorney firm, it would be nearly impossible for me to “disappear” for a full month. I was disheartened until I came across a description for a regional seminar. Though disappointed I’d miss out on the full program, a long, hard-working weekend would benefit my Texas case in the short-term and my career as a trial lawyer in the long-term. I knew that if I dedicated myself that weekend, I would get as much as I could out of the abbreviated program.

Little did I know as I sat at my home computer that fateful night, that I was about to embark on a new path in my professional and personal journey.

2. I MET MYSELF

Having paid my tuition and bought my plane ticket, I found myself flying into the Columbus, Ohio, airport in April 2005. After landing, I followed the instructions to take a bus to a remote, little-known location. Sitting across the aisle from me on that ride to the state park was another trial lawyer, someone I’m proud to call a friend to this day. Like me, Chris Stombaugh was married with children. He was at a similar point in his career, had similar clients, similar struggles, and similar victories. I was struck by how quickly we connected, but reassured by how much we had in common.

Arriving at the seminar, we were assigned rooms based on the alphabet. I was a bit disappointed this arbitrary designation would split me from Chris, but the alphabet helped me that day when I was appointed a room with Michael Leizerman. As I had with Chris, I found a quick kinship with Michael, one that also continues to this day. Imagine my amazement at having found not one, but two people so much like me within the first few hours of my very first TLC event. As I would discover, it was not luck, but a common theme with TLC: we are all trial lawyers, and as trial lawyers, we have far more in common than we do not. We represent people. We help those in need in their struggles against reckless companies, negligent people, and the government.

Over the course of that weekend, the attendees—especially the three of us—developed a bond as we shared our stories, our fears, and our dreams. It was a bond that would strengthen over time, especially as we discovered that TLC had created a new seminar series. As an alternative to the full-time program, which lasts three weeks, TLC was initiating a 7-Step program, one that

would allow students to cover all the aspects of the full-time version, but spread out over seven long-weekend sessions. Chris, Michael and I made a pact at that first regional seminar that we would become 7-Steppers together.

3. PSYCHO-WHAT?

One of the foundational aspects to the TLC method is psychodrama. It is nothing short of a revolutionary way to discover the story of your case, your clients, and the defendants. That being said, it takes dedication and lots of practice to fully unlock its potential. Like some of you, my first experience began with my wanting to learn the magic words or tricks that would promise a future of consistent wins. And like some of you, my first experience resulted in me learning something far more valuable than “words” or “tricks”: I learned that everything I do as a trial lawyer begins with knowing myself.

One of my early psychodramas, led by Don Clarkson, was to direct a significant scene in my life. The students preceding me let the entire group know the details of the moment before beginning. After whispering in Don’s ear, he allowed me to keep the moment a secret to build suspense. We slowly set the scene in great detail, where my parents flew in to Chicago and my soon-to-be fiancé’s parents arrived from the suburbs. The drama built to an emotional peak when she said, “YES!” The power of psychodrama became apparent as not only I, but everyone in the group felt the same emotions as I felt nearly a decade earlier.

In the midst of my 7-Steps, I used the psychodramatic methods I had learned to independently conduct re-enactments of key elements of the cases I was working on, and was also fortunate to conduct reenactments with several fellow 7-Steppers between sessions. I couldn’t believe everything that I learned about my clients and my cases with this tool! I would never conduct a personal psychodrama, as this requires the skill of a trained psychodramatist, but by learning the directing skills and the various methods, I was able to apply role reversal and doubling to scenes in my clients’ stories and the result was nothing short of magical. I love that as a 7-stepper, I was able to work with other TLCers to conduct reenactments on our own, as well as work with trained psychodramatists, while returning to TLC every few months for further honing under the tutelage of TLC staff. In addition to helping with our cases, psychodrama is a great way to learn about ourselves in a deeper, more honest way. Likewise, we 7-Steppers were able to learn more about each other between the 7-Step seminars. I became closer to my TLC sisters and brothers than I was to people I’ve known my whole life through psychodrama and openness and honesty and vulnerability. The regular use of psychodrama, both independently and with other 7-Steppers, would also teach us a great, unique benefit the 7-Step program had over the full-time program.

4. LEARN, APPLY, RETURN

A true advantage of the 7-Step program is the ability to learn a method, such as psychodrama, take that method back to your practice, use it on a case, and then return to TLC to review how it worked for you. Shortly after learning how to set a scene with hands-on work—up off my feet—with psychodramatists and staff, I applied what I’d learned in an actual case back in Chicago.

My case involved a woman who had a spot on her lung. Her radiologist and her family doctor knew she had lung cancer. The woman became my client because she wasn’t told about the spot until twenty-six months later when her family doctor told her of the “mistake.” Fellow 7-Stepper Dan DeWoskin came to Chicago from Atlanta to help me re-enact this powerful scene with my client’s husband (he became a widower early in the case) in preparation for his deposition. I can still picture in my mind the sterile exam room, the patient table covered in paper that crinkled when she sat on it, the way the family doctor tentatively entered the room with hung head, and the tone of his voice when he told of his mistake. Returning to this scene was very emotional for her husband, but it put him back inside the story for his deposition. During his deposition, his memory was clearer and more vivid, while he was emotionally “in the scene” while describing it to the defense attorneys. With Dan’s help, we experienced the undeniable power of psychodrama and the TLC method. This contrasted starkly with the traditional “just the facts” deposition preparation many non-TLC lawyers employ.

Being able to discuss this experience back at another 7-Step seminar helped even more. This feedback loop of learning, applying, and returning is a powerful teaching tool. Through the 7-Step program, we had the unique benefit of using, reviewing, and honing our newly learned skills independently, with fellow 7-Steppers, and back with TLC staff. We were truly learning by doing. However, despite this clear benefit, we still had a lingering worry: were we learning as much as the full-timers? Did the 7-Step program miss the “full”?

5. SEPARATE AND EQUAL

Even though I believed that the 7-Step program was the only viable TLC option for me, I couldn’t help but wonder if I was missing some secret, vital lesson learned in the full-time program. Spreading our instruction over seven steps and across months of time, we would be missing out on the full, all-out, extended immersion into the TLC method the full-timers experienced. Would I get “cheated” by choosing the 7-Step program? My question was answered at a regional that happened to take place at the Ranch about mid-way through my 7-Steps.

While at the Ranch, I had the opportunity to lead a psychodrama focus group, where a psychodramatist helped classmates play various roles in a trial. Moments after I began, a current staff member walked in. When we had finished and everyone was breaking up, he walked up to me and asked if I was on staff. He was impressed by how well I grasped the methods. The takeaway was clear: 7-Steppers could get as much out of TLC as 3-week graduates, (or “full-timers”, as I have come to refer to these alumni!) We were equal. I have seen many of my fellow 7 steppers accomplish terrific results using TLC methods. But in some ways, we were still different.

With no slight to my “full-time” TLC brothers and sisters, I believe that 7-Steppers have a unique advantage. As I mentioned above, spreading the TLC lessons and techniques over time allows us to better digest the concepts through repetition, use in actual practice settings, and review with fellow students and staff along the way. We may have missed the benefits of immersion (and I do not doubt that there are benefits), but we gained the

benefits of really utilizing each new technique in between seminars and experiencing the pluses and minuses of the techniques and our utilization of them. We 7-Steppers *are* different, but there is no question we are equals.

6. GRADUATION

Though I was growing confident that I wasn't receiving a "lesser" TLC education, we 7-Steppers were apprehensive we would be received differently come graduation. We worried that the graduation ceremony for 7-Steppers wouldn't mean as much as that for full-timers. We were wrong; our graduation ceremony was fantastic. Gerry attended and participated, other staff members and full-time program grads spoke warmly of our induction into TLC.

My graduating class honored me by selecting me as the graduate speaker. I was privileged and used the opportunity to thank TLC for creating and offering the 7-Step program. I expressed how much the alternative schedule meant to our class. We felt so strongly about the newly offered 7-Step program that our class gift back to TLC was the donation of a regional scholarship to a lawyer-in-need. We knew first-hand how much the 7-Step program benefitted us in our professional and personal lives that we wanted to ensure others could enjoy the experience as well.

7. POST-GRAD

My TLC experience began as a 7-Stepper, but it has grown and expanded since graduation. The strong ties we forged throughout our seminars grew to include graduates of the full-time program as well as TLC staff. My involvement in and dedication to TLC continues. I have returned to graduate programs each of the six years since completion of the 7-Step program. I

was privileged to recently complete my three-year term on the F-Warrior Board. And for the last several years, I have been organizing and hosting a local monthly group in Chicago where TLC students and grads get together and work on each other's cases using the methods and techniques we learned—regardless of which TLC path we travelled. Back to the "original three," Chris Stombaugh, Michael Leizerman, and I recently successfully tried (twice, but that's a different story) a wrongful death case together in Arizona. The skills we learned as 7-Steppers and the tight relationship developed over that same time enabled us to obtain justice for the parents whose son was killed by a reckless trucking company.

At each opportunity I've had to reconnect with TLC graduates, it's wonderful to discover how we've travelled a similar, yet unique journey. We come from the same beginnings as trial lawyers wanting to better serve our clients. Although we may take divergent paths (7 steps versus 3 weeks), we end up at our common goal as Warriors. I can't speak to the experience of the full-time program because it's not my story. But I hope I've shared my 7-Step story in such a way that helps you know me and my fellow 7-Steppers a little better, helps you know our story a little more deeply, and helps you make the choice that's right for you if you're considering which path to follow. 🍷

Ken Levinson, a child injury lawyer and child safety advocate, heads the trial practice of the Joseph, Lichtenstein & Levinson law firm in Chicago, Illinois. Ken helps families in serious injury and wrongful death cases throughout the country against reckless companies and individuals. Ken, his wife, and three sons make their home in the Chicagoland area. If you would like to discuss the 7-step program in more detail with Ken, please feel free to contact him at: khlevinson@aol.com



Ken Levinson is standing next to Gerry Spence.