

ONE ON ONE

John Lajoie • *Private eye*

By Allen W. Fletcher

John Lajoie is president of Lajoie Investigations Inc. and was recently named National Investigator of the Year by the National Association of Investigative Specialists. Born in Worcester, he went to Harlow Street Elementary School, Burncoat Junior High School and West Boylston Senior High School, after which he spent six years in the U.S. Air Force. He subsequently earned a B.A. in history, political science and philosophy from Worcester State College. He worked for Commerce Insurance Co. for many years, developing an expertise in investigative work, and he started his own company in 1989. He is 45 years old.

What does it take to be good at this?

You have to have people skills and be a regular guy.

That's not something you go to school for.

That's something that's not learned. It's really innate. You have to know how to approach and how to be approached. You have to be able to size up the individual you're either speaking with or interviewing within seconds, finding something in common with the individual by looking at them and being able to relate that to something in your life, so you can open up a friendly rapport. And once that's done, you pretty much can talk with anybody. And then you have to be willing to delve deeply into things that other people would consider very boring, like looking through massive amounts of phone records. You're looking at something an inch thick and you're trying to find one little entry in this record that might help the cause, whatever cause you're working on. Those are really the aspects that you need.

When you're talking with somebody, do they always know you're a private eye?

For the most part, yes. It depends upon the situation. If I'm going into a sting operation, I'm surely not going to announce who I am. I have to be open and up front with people and tell them without releasing too much information

why it would be helpful for both of us if they would provide me with information. That's the best policy, and lying to them will not help. Identification is a must, being open and honest with them. I often tell them I'm not there to pull the wool over their eyes, but I will tell them I will get the information. You first use the honey and variations of that honey, and if that doesn't work, then you have to go to vinegar. I hate to have to do that.

Can you give me some examples of different kinds of vinegar?

A subpoena would be one way that we would have a witness in, either through a hearing or deposition. The problem with that is that you don't know what they're going to say and you have the other side there. Then there's the court order. That's strenuous, and it carries more weight. When you go with a federal court order to serve somebody, that's as vinegar-ish as I'm going to get. I've done that — not that I want to, but if I get a key witness not talking, I will do whatever I have to do to protect the innocent client. And I'll do it within the letter of the law. That's the key. Now, 99 times out of a 100, I will get a witness to talk, even if they've refused to talk before. And that's done by establishing a rapport with the person and treating them with the respect they deserve, whether it's a homeless person or the president of General Motors.

What are the principal tools of the trade?

I don't carry a gun, so for those who think that would be No. 1, they're wrong. The principal tool is to be able to speak. That is the principal tool that separates the men from the boys in this profession. What separates a good private investigator and a great one, is how to speak and when to speak. And then writing is the second, because the client gets a report, and what's in that report is important, as well as how it's communicated on paper. And then the third tool is intuition. This is based upon the gut feeling, not just coming out of nowhere, but coming out of the experience of the investigator — his knowledge, work experience, history. That's a pretty big tool.

Our image of this is that it's all babes and thugs and stakeouts. Is this correct?

I am completely appalled with what Hollywood — and in some cases the media — has done to my profession. Most of us are college-educated. We do not carry weapons, although we are licensed to carry them, and we don't hang around on street corners with the long trench coats and hats, smoking cigars. And I don't have a martini in one hand and a girl in the other. Car chases aren't done with red Mustangs. There are no car chases, although we do surveillance. There's no such thing as doing the surveillance and 30 seconds after you've arrived, the subject is coming out of the house. There's no picking locks and breaking into people's houses. Today's PIs work within the letter of the law, do most of their work in the daylight, not in the darkness, and spend an awful lot of time doing research and gathering public record information and garnering information from other sources. Before the advent of legislation that required licensing, I think it might have been a little dirtier than it is, but it's not dirty today, because of the laws that restrict those people, especially those seedy people who might want to become a PI.

Who is getting away with things these days?

I don't know that anyone is getting away with anything. They may think they are, but in the end, they'll have to answer, whether to some criminal or civil authority, or to the man upstairs. What goes around comes around; I think that's pretty accurate. Most of the crimes I'm investigating, I'm doing it from a defense standpoint, and most of the stuff I do is homicide, criminal defense work, rapes, assault and batteries, deadly weapons, robberies, bank robberies, all the things that would be considered capital felonies. And that's serious stuff.

Have you ever worked for someone who you thought was guilty?

Oh sure — many, many times. I've worked for guilty defendants and I will continue to, because in the U.S. we have a Constitution and Bill of Rights and I take that very, very seriously. I'm an



John Lajoie |

advocate of due process of law, and that's how I look at it.

What's the toughest part of the job? What are the aspects that you dread doing?

Pedophilic crimes are really difficult, because when you're looking at photographs of children who have been abused or killed as a result of some sort of pedophilic behavior, you can't help but feel the emotional strings, but the greater duty in my opinion is to the Constitution and so I have to separate my emotional feelings from my professionalism — put my emotional feelings aside and let my professionalism take over.

Do you ever get yourself into a position of danger?

Of course, but that's where the speaking, intuition and knowledge takes over, because I need to be able to talk my way out of a dangerous situation, rather than pulling a gun out. So I've been in situations where I've been scared, but who was it that said, "Never let them see you sweat"?

You're able to do that?

I try to not let people see me sweat, but there are times when I do. But Worcester is a great city. It has its problems, but I feel comfortable knowing the traditions and the ways of the people of Worcester and Worcester County. Because I'm one of them, I think I can talk my way out of most dangerous situations and maybe get out of there by the skin of my teeth — all the time, because I'm still standing. □

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