

Trial lawyers honor trio for work in defense of councilmen

By DOUG SHERWIN, The Daily Transcript
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The three defense attorneys who worked on one of San Diego's highest profile political corruption cases were in the spotlight again Tuesday night.

Jerry Coughlan, Michael Pancer and Michael Crowley, co-counsel in the former city councilmen's trial last summer, were named the Top Trial Lawyers of 2005 by the Criminal Defense Bar Association of San Diego.

"We're recognizing an extraordinary team effort as well as heroic individual efforts on behalf of their clients," said Mark Adams, president of the Criminal Defense Bar. "When you realize that the public and other lawyers and news media were looking over their shoulder, ... it adds another layer of stress.

"Coughlan, I know, was working 12- to 16-hour days and the same goes for Pancer. They bore the brunt of the government's case. Crowley did all the right things. I know he was a big help during the trial, too."

Coughlan and Pancer represented former councilmen Michael Zucchet and Ralph Inzunza during their three-month trial last summer.

Zucchet and Inzunza were convicted by a jury of participating in a conspiracy with strip club officials to try to change the city's "no touch" policy.

Zucchet, however, was later acquitted on seven of the nine counts by U.S. District Judge Jeffrey Miller. The other two counts were dismissed but are subject to appeal.

Inzunza was sentenced to 21 months in prison, but the case is on appeal.

"Win or lose, in criminal defense it's the work that matters," Crowley said. "It's pretty much a 24-7 effort that goes into defending someone in a trial, especially when the full force of the federal government is coming down on you."

Crowley represented former aid David Cowan, who was charged with giving a false statement to the government. Cowan was an aid of Charles Lewis, the third councilman charged in the case. Lewis died before the trial started and was dropped from the case.

Cowan was acquitted by the jury.

"I was very honored by (the trial award) because it comes from my peers," Crowley said. "I've been doing this more than 20 years. It's nice to get recognition not only for a particular case, but I take it for all the work in the trenches I do along with all the other criminal defense attorneys.

"It's especially gratifying that it came on behalf of David Cowan, who I think is an excellent human being and should never have been prosecuted by the federal government. Thank goodness a jury saw it that way."

The government's case was the result of a lengthy investigation over several years. The trial involved countless hours of taped conversations between the councilmen and strip club officials.

"This was an extremely important case, not only for the defense, but for the community," Coughlan said. "I'm very pleased to receive the (trial attorney) award with Mike Pancer and Mike Crowley. Obviously the three of us worked very hard on that case.

"The true reward comes from serving a client as special as Mike Zucchet. I was always confident that under the law, they would be vindicated, and we're pretty close to being there. I'm pleased that I can play a role in the process."

Both Zucchet and Inzunza resigned their positions following the jury convictions. Zucchet, meanwhile, said he had no desire to return to political office following his acquittal.

Crowley said he owes his victory, in part, to his co-counsel.

"I couldn't have achieved it without Jerry and Mike's hard work and the work of their staffs, too," Crowley said. "They did incredible chronologies of everything that happened. Unlike some cases that have co-defendants, the attorneys all worked together really well in this case and stuck together."

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