

Conn. Lawyer's Racing Team Raises Money to Fight Genetic Disorder

MEGAN SPICER, *The Connecticut Law Tribune*

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There comes a time in a young lawyer's life when he must trade in his flame-resistant racing suit for a button-down business suit. At least that was the case for Frank Lieto. But though he's no longer behind the wheel of a 100-mph race car, the attorney at Goldman, Gruder & Woods is still guiding a racing team, and raising hundreds of thousands of dollars for charity in the process.

And this is his unique story, one that starts in a go-kart when Lieto was 9 years old. Soon after, he said, he began "begging" his father to let him participate in real races. After all, his father and uncle had raced go-karts as kids and had been national champions. "Racing has always been in my family," said Lieto.

Lieto found he had a talent for racing and quickly moved up in the ranks, abandoning the ground-hugging go-kart in favor of a sprint car, a small, but powerful race car with large wings affixed to the top. The sprint car circuit has served as a launching pad for drivers wanting to

make their way to the big leagues of NASCAR, with drivers such as Jeff Gordon and Tony Stewart cutting their teeth on the short, oval dirt tracks.

By the time he was 16, Lieto was racing professionally for the United Racing Club, an old and famous organization that hosts races along the East Coast. He won that circuit's rookie of the year award. His career later survived a major setback—his race car was stolen from his family's property in Monroe—and he continued to compete. Until he went off to law school.

"Law school put a big damper on the racing," Lieto said. And that was that. Immediately after graduating from Brooklyn Law School, Lieto started working, eventually founding his own firm, Lieto & Greenberg, which merged with Goldman Gruder & Woods in Trumbull, where Lieto heads the criminal and family law practices. With a family to raise, there was no way he could get behind the wheel of one of the cars again.

But he never forgot his racing past and the years he spent his weekends on the track, kicking up dirt and racing toward the finish line. "I've always stayed involved and supported those who supported me," Lieto said. What the father of three didn't know though was that his fast past and his future in nonprofit work would collide and create a union that would benefit all parties involved.

In July 2013, Lieto was on vacation in Lake George, New York, with his wife and some friends. His best friend, Joe Moretti, received a call that would change not only his life, but Lieto's as well.

The day before the Fourth of July, Moretti received a diagnosis that explained why his son, Joey, was experiencing developmental delays. Joey has what's known as Angelman syndrome, a genetic disorder. "Everyone was upset. Everyone went on their iPads and iPhones learning what there was to know about it," Lieto recalled.

But their searches were futile, as little information was available online. There were very few federal dollars being devoted to research, though there were a handful of medical opinions that pointed to stem cells as a way to treat the condition.

Angelman syndrome affects the nervous system and causes delayed development, intellectual disabilities, severe speech impediments, and problems with movement and balance. Children with the syndrome die every year due to complications from seizures.

By September 2013, just shy of three months after the initial phone call, the Fighting Angels Foundation had been created, with Lieto at the helm as president. By then, his plate was full with his family, his legal practice, and his public service as chairman of Monroe's Town Council and as an administrator of Monroe's Little League.

But coming up with ways to fight a rare disease didn't seem like work. "To me it's a breath of fresh air," Lieto said. "All I've known since being out of law school was being a lawyer. I've never really had another job. But to take yourself out of your profession and insert yourself in another business that's so purposeful is so refreshing."

For a while, running the Fighting Angels Foundation and attending sprint car races in Pennsylvania and nearby states were two distinct aspects of Lieto's life. Then, one day in 2014, he saw a way to combine his two passions. During a race in Mechanicsburg, Pennsylvania, Lieto spotted something. On the wings of one of the cars circling the track was a logo for a foundation focused on Prader Willi syndrome, which is a disorder caused by a deletion on the 15th chromosome, just like Angelman syndrome. The Prader Willi Foundation had sponsored the driver.

"Racing is all about advertising," Lieto said. And it's true. On Saturdays and Sundays, racing fans are bombarded by sponsors' names and logos affixed to stock cars and Indianapolis 500-style racers—and their drivers' uniforms.

The metaphorical light bulb above Lieto's head illuminated.

"Recently, through the foundation, we sponsored a race car driver who is 26 years old," Lieto said. "He has very upstanding morals and ideals and reminds me of myself." The Fighting Angels Foundation's driver is Ryan Smith, who races on the All-Stars Circuit of Champions. Famous NASCAR driver Tony Stewart recently purchased the racing circuit, which holds 50 races around the country.

Now the Fighting Angels Foundation's logo appears on Smith's purple and lime green car, which is seen by thousands at tracks in Pennsylvania, Ohio and other far-flung places. Lieto said the car is spreading the word about Angelman syndrome in places to which he has no personal ties.

Lieto said Stewart is now helping the Fighting Angels Foundation. And racing fans are donating as well. To date, the foundation has raised more than \$200,000, and recently gave a \$50,000 grant to the University of Connecticut Health Center genetics lab, where researchers are studying the syndrome. "The racing community supports those business that support [the sport]," Lieto explained. "They're super-loyal people. They're the salt of the earth." •