

IN CONVERSATION | JIM STURMAN QC

The life of a criminal defence lawyer: death threats, tears and 16-hour days

Jim Sturman QC, who most recently defended Wayne Couzens, tells Catherine Baksi how he is determined that no innocent person should be convicted

Hate mail, death threats and being spat at in the street have become part of life for Jim Sturman QC after almost 40 years at the criminal Bar.

He has represented individuals charged with the most horrific crimes, most recently acting for Wayne Couzens, the Metropolitan police officer sentenced to life imprisonment after pleading guilty to the rape and murder of Sarah Everard.

Sturman will not discuss the Couzens case, but he says that generally the death threats often express the hope that his family “will know how it feels” to suffer in the same way as the families affected by the actions his clients are accused of.

It is “the most difficult” thing he has to deal with as a barrister, because “you never know if the author is going to follow through”.

Though he tries to disregard the threats, Sturman says “I keep them in the safe in case I am killed unexpectedly”.

And in big cases, the threats serve to help him rise to occasion. “You make damn sure of two things — you leave no stone unturned and make every point it’s proper to make and you don’t not take any point it’s improper to make.”

Sturman was called to the Bar in 1982 and has been a tenant at 2 Bedford Row, where he is co-head, for 38 years.

His briefs over the years have included cases that involve much distressing evidence — after only four years in practice Sturman had acted in 15 murder cases.

The QC says that the evidence in certain cases does affect him and admits that he has “been left an emotional wreck” while preparing some trials and was “in floods of



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tears” reading the medical evidence in two cases where parents had been charged with killing their children.

He successfully defended Colin Stagg, the man acquitted of murdering Rachel Nickell in 1994. Her killer Robert Napper was only arrested after he had killed another woman.

Acting for the defence, Sturman insists that he has huge empathy for the family and friends of victims, particularly after one of his best friends was killed and he saw the impact on his family and children.

To be an effective defence counsel “you have to come to a case with compassion for both sides”, insists Sturman. But, he laments, “the public does not have much compassion for defendants — they read headlines and tweets and are not interested in assessing the evidence”.

Significant cuts to criminal legal aid over the past decade, says Sturman, has resulted in a “two-tier system of justice”.

The lawyer who in 2005 gained publicity for being the first barrister to earn more than £1 million in a single year from legal aid, now only takes about one publicly funded case a year.

But, suggests Sturman, had Stagg gone to trial, the hue and cry created by the police and some sections of the press would have resulted in an innocent man being convicted.



His clients have included Gary Clarence, centre, whose wife killed their children REX FEATURES

He lambasts several attorneys-general for being “too cowardly” to take action for contempt of court against some newspapers, who, in “pandering to the prejudice of middle England”, have overstepped the mark and created the real risk of miscarriages of justice.

Many other QCs, he says, no longer touch any legal aid work and he warns there is a “real risk” that work may not be done properly by lawyers earning less than the minimum wage.

But he fears that the government will not provide more funding for the criminal justice system. “The public hate us until they need us. The tragedy of the criminal justice system is that until you’re caught up in the sausage machine, as victim or defendant, you don’t appreciate how broken it is.”

Sturman’s success has been hard won. In high profile cases, where he knows that the media spotlight will be on and any miss-step seized on, he “immerses” himself in them, working ten to 16 hours a day, six or seven days a week.

The scrutiny means that everything he says in court has been written down beforehand. His skeleton arguments are the result of “weeks of gestation” and days before a trial starts, he is still “in agonies” making changes.

The feeling that a missed point or an un-asked question may have led to the conviction of an innocent person, he adds, fuels his anxiety and makes him work harder.

Sturman remains convinced of the innocence of the man who was convicted in the first rape case he defended, in 1986. “I will go to my grave thinking he was innocent, but the [judge’s] summing up was impeccable and there were no grounds of appeal.”

Born in Buxton, Derbyshire, in 1958, Sturman was adopted by his mother’s husband, who was in the Royal Air Force, when he was 11. He went to boarding schools in Norfolk and on the Isle of Wight, after which he was the first in his family to go to university.

Set on studying english or history, in the wake of the 1977 recession a teacher advised him to get a job with a professional qualification. He studied law at Reading University. “I hated it, burnt my lecture notes after my last exam and vowed I’d never look at a law book again.”

Coming to London, his housemates persuaded him to join them studying on the Bar course and he received a scholarship from Gray’s Inn.

Outside crime, Sturman, who is season ticket holder at Tottenham Hotspur, acts for clubs and individuals brought before regulatory and disciplinary tribunals across a range of sports, including football, ending up on page one of rival club Arsenal’s fazine.