

LIONS OF THE TEXAS BAR

Ronny Krist: The Empathetic Advocate

By Janet Elliott

(Dec. 3) – The January 1967 launch pad fire that claimed the lives of three Apollo astronauts was America's first space program disaster. That same year a young attorney named Ronald Krist opened a law office in Clear Lake not far from NASA headquarters.

Several years had passed when Betty Grissom, the widow of astronaut Gus Grissom, showed up at Krist's office.

"Betty happened to come by my office and visit with me about her case and the fact that no one had ever done anything about it," says Krist. "We were two weeks short of four years when we undertook to assert her case and it worked out fine."

Grissom told the *Houston Chronicle* shortly after the January 1986 Challenger space shuttle disaster that she would have received no financial judgment for her husband's death if Krist had not filed a last-minute lawsuit that resulted in a \$350,000 award from shuttle contractor North American Rockwell.

"It was a different story with respect to the Challenger," says Krist, who secured confidential settlements for families of three of the seven

astronauts who died when the space shuttle exploded on liftoff almost exactly 19 years after the Apollo fire. "We didn't have a statute of limitations problem and, consequently, the recoveries were considerably larger."

Krist's firm also was involved in litigation following the Columbia shuttle re-entry disaster in 2003.

"It's interesting to see how the space industry reacted to these cases over almost half a century," he says. "It all got smoother and easier and people stood up to their responsibilities much quicker and better in the later cases."

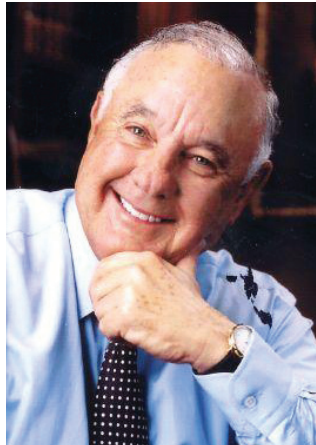
While the space program cases settled, Krist is best known for his ability to connect with jurors over

five decades of trying personal injury and other cases. His son, who now owns The Krist Law Firm, says it all begins with his dad's empathy with his clients.

"He truly expresses what they have been put through and why this defendant ought to be held responsible," says Scott Krist. "Some lawyers rely on mass preparation. Ronny is just a very naturally gifted trial lawyer."

Son Kevin Krist also is practicing personal injury law in Houston.

"I'm comfortable speaking to juries," says Ron Krist in a phone interview from Centerville, >



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where he was in trial in late October. "I try to put myself in the client's position and try to commiserate with their circumstance, and I think it shows in my presentation that I sincerely do care."

Krist, a 1962 University of Texas School of Law graduate, secured one of the first million-dollar verdicts in Texas and at one point held the record verdict simultaneously in Brazoria, Dallas, Galveston and Travis counties.

A pioneer in the development of products liability law in Texas, Krist represented the plaintiff in *Turner v. General Motors*, the 1979 Texas Supreme Court case that established the doctrine of crashworthiness.

"The states were evenly divided at the time on recognizing crashworthiness," says Krist. "It will probably go down as one of the most important products liability cases in the history of Texas because it created a cause of action where one didn't exist before."

The outcome at the Texas Supreme Court was less favorable for another of Krist's high-profile cases. Known as the "sex tapes case," Krist represented a female college student who was secretly taped having sex with her boyfriend. The court in 1993's *Boyles v. Kerr* refused to recognize her claim for negligent infliction of emotional damages and remanded the case for a new trial.

Krist says the case against the male student and three of his friends who participated in the taping was settled for \$1 million, the amount of the initial verdict. Some time later, Krist received a tip that seven lawyers from a firm that represented the defendants had impermissibly viewed the tape after the case was concluded.

"They were drinking and hooting and hollering. One of their secretaries was incensed and called me about it," says Krist. "They had to pay us



\$100,000 per ticket for a total of \$700,000."

In addition to his personal injury work, Krist has represented corporations such as ConocoPhillips and BP. "If I think a company or a person is being taken advantage of and has a decent case, I'd take it on," he says.

The Leon County trial was the last for Krist, 78, who says he doesn't want to stay in the game so long he loses his skills. He represented a small Tyler-based oil company in a dispute involving a well allegedly destroyed by defective drill pipes. The jury placed fault on defendants who had settled but Krist said he still was able to secure some money for his client due to a pre-trial agreement.

Many of Krist's cases over the years came through referrals from lawyers who knew his reputation. Now, he says, inexperienced lawyers advertise on TV about how tough they are, even though they most likely are not. >

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"It used to be you'd get out of law school and go to work for a law firm trying smaller cases in JP or county court or second-chairing district court for the first couple of years. It was kind of like an internship," he says.

"Now you've got a kid right out of law school who starts running these ridiculous ads and getting a ton of business with an unearned

reputation. And they are settling cases for a small percentage of their true value. It's not good for the public. It's not good for the profession. It's terrible."

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