

‘For Love & Life’: Touching Base with Skadden Associate and ALS Advocate Brian Wallach

By Ross Todd

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The line seems to fall from the sky to **Brian Wallach**.

“This is my final closing argument.”

Inspiration can come in a flash, as the result of the grind of hard work, or sometimes, as here, from the combination of the two.

Late in the new documentary film *For Love & Life: No Ordinary Campaign*, released May 28 on Amazon Prime, we see Wallach, a litigation associate at **Skadden, Arps, Slate, Meagher & Flom**, in the moment he first says those words.

Wallach was diagnosed with amyotrophic lateral sclerosis in 2017. ALS, often referred to as Lou Gehrig’s disease, is typically fatal within three to five years. Wallach had just returned home from the hospital with his wife Sandra Abrevaya after the birth of their second daughter when he received his diagnosis.

In the documentary, we see Wallach and Abrevaya—who met while they both worked on Barack Obama’s first presidential campaign—sitting in a hotel room late one night in July 2021 as they prepare to testify before Congress. Wallach is by this point using a motorized wheelchair to get around. He and his wife have come to Washington, D.C. on behalf of ALS patients and their families in support of the Accelerating Access to Critical Therapies for ALS Act, a bill designed to give patients access to promising, experimental therapies.

The filmmakers capture Wallach’s goofy side in this scene and throughout the film, which chronicles the



Credit: Congressional photographer via I AM ALS

Skadden associate and ALS advocate Brian Wallach testifying before the House Appropriations Subcommittee on Labor, Health and Human Services, Education and related Agencies on April 9, 2019.

couple’s work forming the I AM ALS foundation after his diagnosis. Here Wallach does a seated version of “the running man” dance while Abrevaya notes that he’s got something stuck in his teeth. As they work on their testimony, Wallach and Abrevaya key in on a nugget from Brian’s professional biography: He was an assistant U.S. attorney in Chicago at the time of his diagnosis.

That’s what sparks the “final closing argument” line. After Wallach initially says it Abrevaya responds: “No, don’t make it sound like you’re dying.”

"I am," says Wallach. "That's the whole point."

When I connected with Wallach via email last week he told me it was "very hard" to watch that scene in the documentary. He said that moment was the first time he and his wife "really" talked about the possibility that he would die from ALS.

"We both knew that it was a possibility but we were both committed to making my generation of ALS patients the first generation to survive ALS," he said.

The emotional climax of the film comes the next day when it's time to deliver the "final closing argument" line to Congress. But when delivered, we see the couple find a way to make the closing argument together, and to incorporate all the other families affected by ALS that we have met earlier in the film who are part of the I AM ALS movement. When it comes time for them to testify, Abrevaya introduces her husband and notes that he was an AUSA when he was diagnosed with ALS.

"This is our closing argument for our lives," Wallach says.

"This is our closing argument for our lives," echoes Abrevaya, as Wallach fights back tears.

Wallach said he and his wife knew that that line "would have a tremendous impact on the members of Congress, as well as all the people watching our testimony."

Indeed, we see his wife powerfully plead for the committee to pass the proposed bill.

"Please do not let another generation of ALS patients die in pursuit of the perfect," she says in closing. "Please let this be the first generation to survive."

There's no need for a spoiler alert here. After the bill passed both the Senate and House with overwhelming support, President Joe Biden signed it into law in December 2021. The president acknowledged the work that Wallach and Abrevaya did to land the bill on his desk during the signing ceremony.

Wallach, whom *The American Lawyer* honored last year as "Attorney of the Year: Highly Commended" for

his work on the I AM ALS foundation, said he hopes people take three things from the film.

"First, I hope that the film inspires them to stand up and take action to fix whatever burden they have in their lives. Second, I hope that some of the people who watch the film will get involved in the fight against ALS and other neurodegenerative diseases. Third, I hope they will tell everyone that they know to watch the film. All you need to watch the film is a subscription to Amazon Prime," he said.

Take this column as me following up on Brian's third request.

The fact that Wallach is a lawyer plays a lesser role than the campaign themes that run throughout the film. But his profession is no doubt important to the narrative. It's the butt of the joke of the origin story of his relationship with his wife. In the film, he tells the story of Abrevaya signing on to head communications for Obama's New Hampshire campaign and reading a press release that he wrote. When she asked who wrote it, he said he was expecting kudos. Instead, he was told that lawyers can't write press releases. (His wife, for what it's worth, says in the film that she can't remember this back-and-forth, but seems amused that it's assumed something of mythical status with Wallach.)

I asked Wallach how his legal background helps him with his ALS advocacy.

"Being a lawyer has helped me be fearless and helped me write Act For ALS. I could not have done what we did without my legal training," he said. "I am also lucky to have married someone who has a background in communications and who knows Capitol Hill," he added.

I also asked Wallach if he had any message he wanted to share with Litigation Daily readers. Here's what he had to say: "Lawyers have the power to make our government work better including our healthcare system. They also have the power to help people who otherwise would be left out of the system. All you have to do is use your legal training for good."