

From the Bar: A Legal Career Distinguished by Compassion

*Donald A. Robinson**

Dean Ronald J. Riccio has devoted his career to helping others. I write with personal knowledge because twenty-seven years ago he helped a good friend of mine, and often in the past ten years I've seen him welcoming students into his law school office and helping them. His title is Dean of Faculty and Students. In fact, though, he has been the Dean of Compassion.

One of my earliest professional memories of Ron stemmed from one of his very first cases as a young lawyer when he helped out my friend, who was the victim of a dog bite. Ron had just been admitted to the bar and was part of our new law firm, Robinson, Wayne & Greenberg. I would not normally have had much confidence in a new associate's youthful willingness to learn dog-bite law, ability to investigate the facts, and competence to draft a complaint. He was, after all, only twenty-five. However, I had already experienced Ron's talent as a legal research assistant then as an opinion writer for Federal Judge Lawrence A. Whipple. More importantly, I had come to know him as a young man who possessed basic qualities: sincerity, integrity, and the most vital quality of all, a fierce desire to help people. I recognized Ron as a person who was living by the words we all should — do unto others as you would have them do unto you.

So, I readily turned over my dog-bitten friend to Ron's capable hands. Although he was inexperienced in the intricacies of dog-bite law and still an untested freshman associate at the firm, Ron attacked the problem with vigor, thoroughly researching the law on the subject and drafting a complaint. Eventually, he managed to settle the case.

In between being the advocate suing a dog owner and becoming the dean of one of the region's leading law schools, Ron became a talented trial lawyer. He started out in the library researching and writing briefs, but it was not long before he was on his feet in court,

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fearless and fighting. His advocacy developed into superb writing skills. His briefs were masterpieces of writing. One word describes those briefs: organization. His techniques became the model for all of us in the firm. He became known as "The Wrist" thanks to his writing talent, which he exercised by first hand-writing an outline, then doing exhaustive research in the library, followed by hand-writing a draft. Despite his drafts and rewrites, his so-called drafts were artistic, near-final products that, while not always ultimate winners, always were persuasive pieces of writing. "The Wrist" earned a partnership in our litigation firm and the name "Riccio" was added to the firm's name, Robinson, Wayne, Greenberg, Riccio & LaSala.

Our firm was growing, and so was Ron's legal expertise, reputation, and career. Memorable among his litigation accomplishments was his pursuit of a claim by St. Paul's Monastery in Union City, New Jersey, which was the naïve victim of an embezzlement of several million dollars. After dozens of depositions, motions, and intense trial preparation, all of which Ron handled alone, his adversaries settled. Another notable case involved a trademark infringement battle between two pharmaceutical giants, American Cyanamid Company and Johnson & Johnson. Ron was the teammate who assisted me during the early phases of the protracted litigation. I then became involved in a trial out of town. Suddenly, our adversary filed an emergency motion for a temporary restraining order in Federal Court. If granted, the motion would have stopped our client from marketing its product. Ron, alone, only three years out of law school, convinced Chief Judge Anthony T. Augelli to deny the temporary restraining order. All of us at the firm, me from afar, and an overjoyed client, celebrated the advocacy victory of our young teammate.

Because he wanted to be even more helpful to others, especially deserving young people who wanted law careers, Ron abandoned the financial rewards of private practice in 1988 and became the sixth dean of Seton Hall Law School. The Dean found comfort in himself and in his cause to help others — especially those folks needing extra help. His door was always open to students, faculty, and staff. I know he will remember the time he spent interacting with them, answering questions, and resolving problems as some of the fondest memories of his tenure. For students, Ron's classes in Constitutional Law were certainly the intellectual highlight of the first-year experience. Ron brought a prominence and stature to the law school that elevated awareness and respect for the school not only within the building and among faculty and students, but throughout the state and region.

When Seton Hall Law School was emerging from just a few rooms above Arnold's Restaurant in Newark, not yet the acclaimed school it has become, graduates were often overlooked as applicants for associate positions in the established firms in the New Jersey legal community. The judiciary, too, overlooked them for clerkships. A Seton Hall graduate usually had to practice alone or form a small firm with a few classmates. But with Ron at the helm, the legal community could not help but take notice of Seton Hall Law School and the fine young lawyers it produced. Dean Riccio's dedication to excellence during the past decade has enabled graduates to begin legal careers without restrictions on job opportunities in New Jersey and nationwide. Seton Hall Law School graduates now are routinely snatched up by the top firms throughout New Jersey, New York City, and across the country. They also compete for and win some of the top federal and state judicial clerkships. Ron has helped promote the visibility and reputation of the school throughout the state and region. He has truly made a difference.

Ron's work as a lawyer, educator, Dean, and compassionate ear to anyone needing help is summarized in the words of one client who years ago said to me: "You told me I'd be satisfied with that kid Riccio; you were wrong. I'm more than satisfied; he's the greatest." That opinion is shared by his hundreds of friends in the judicial-legal community, by the thousands of students who have studied at Seton Hall School of Law during the past ten years, and by scores of clients, including one dog-bite victim, who Ron aided during his legal career.

As he moves on to enjoy the next chapter in his career, I salute "The Wrist," the Dean of Compassion, my friend Ron Riccio with my sincerest wishes to him and his family for more and more health, happiness, and success — in that order.