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## Pomaro to retire after 49 years

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Nicholas T. Pomaro will retire in June after almost half a century in the legal profession as a prosecutor, judge and advocate for the blind and visually impaired.

But the practice of law wasn't what he originally wanted to do.

"In high school, I wanted to be an electrical engineer," Pomaro said, adding that he scored well on math and science college entrance exams.

Pomaro qualified for the University of Notre Dame's engineering program, but one thing led school officials to discourage him.

Pomaro lost his sight at the age of 6 due to a rare blood disease in which a blood clot forms over the optic nerve.

"They told me I could enter any other college or school, but not engineering," he said. "And I wanted to go to Notre Dame more than I wanted to be an engineer. I didn't know what I wanted to do, so I went into business."

After a month at Notre Dame, Pomaro transferred to DePaul University, where he completed his business degree.

He thought about becoming a stock broker. Then he received a scholarship to attend law school.

"I went to law school, and I loved it. And the rest is history," he said.

Pomaro graduated in 1964 from The John Marshall Law School.

He went into private practice for about six months before getting a job at the Cook County state's attorney's office in the criminal division and fraud department.

"I was hired on with the

understanding that I would not work in the courtroom, because they didn't think it would be plausible for a blind person," he said.

A year and a half later, Pomaro prosecuted a misdemeanor case and then handled three appeals.

"I was under the impression if I was successful, I'd stay. And if not, I'd go back to the desk job," he said. "And it turned out well."

One of his colleagues — Joseph V. Roddy, a partner at the Law Offices of Joseph V. Roddy — said Pomaro overcomes obstacles due to his determined attitude.

"There is nothing this man can't do in terms of law," he said. "He's got a great heart and tremendous insight in terms of people. By the tones and inflections in their voice, he can tell if a person is credible and telling the truth or not."

Pomaro compared the trial experience to athletics because of the competitiveness and suspense in the courtroom.

"I'm a big White Sox fan and the thrill of winning the 2005 World Series as a fan was tremendous," he said. "But when you are trying a case with a jury ... and when they read the verdict, it's even more tremendous. When you win it's joyful, and when you lose it's heart-breaking."

After about 10 years as a prosecutor who primarily handled criminal felony cases, Pomaro wanted to challenge himself more. So he applied for a seat on the Cook County bench in 1976.

"There were still a lot of doubts even though I had tried hundreds of cases," he said. "I had to convince The Chicago Bar Association that I was qualified, and they did rule me qualified."

Out of 135 applicants,



Nicholas T. Pomaro

Pomaro's confidence and persistence helped him stand out.

"I've always encountered doubts, and that brings on a fighting spirit in you to challenge and defeat those doubts," he said.

Pomaro spent 29 years on the bench as an associate judge and presided over cases in the 2nd and 3rd Municipal Districts.

Eugene G. Callahan, owner of Eugene G. Callahan & Associates LLC in Oak Brook, worked with Pomaro in the state's attorney's office.

Pomaro prepared thoroughly for every case he heard from the bench, Callahan said, and had someone read him the necessary documents.

"He didn't come with any premonitions of anybody," Callahan said. "He couldn't tell if you were white, black, Asian, had 50 tattoos or dressed in a Brooks Brothers suit."

Two days after retiring from the bench in 2005, Pomaro helped open The Chicago Lighthouse for People Who Are Blind or Visually Impaired Arthur and Esther Kane Legal

Clinic, where he serves as the director.

The clinic helps low-income blind and visually impaired clients with legal issues related to discrimination, foreclosures, divorce, taxes, Social Security and other civil matters.

It's the only legal clinic of its kind in the country that provides pro bono legal assistance to blind people.

"I've gotten phone calls from every state," he said. "I had a judge in South Korea who wrote me for advice on blind judges."

Now that the clinic features two offices — one in Chicago on Roosevelt Road and another in Glenview which opened last year — Pomaro hopes more expansion occurs.

"It's hard for (blind) people to travel. ... I wish we could service more people nationally," he said.

Janet Szlyk, The Chicago Lighthouse president and executive director, said Pomaro played a key role in recruiting attorneys to help at the clinic.

"He has really been the catalyst in the community, reaching out to attorneys, because many of the cases can't be handled internally and are handed out to pro bono attorneys," she said.

"He built that network and was really able to utilize it to help others with these services."

The Chicago Lighthouse will honor Pomaro with the Jacob Bolotin Award at its annual dinner May 16 at the Four Seasons Hotel, 120 E. Delaware Place.

After retiring, Pomaro plans to learn some foreign languages, including Italian and French.

"I like astronomy and geology," he said. "So I'd like to take courses about those, too."