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## A CIVIC MIND

### Romanucci: A rainmaker for community causes

By Dustin J. Seibert

It's the painting of an ancient Roman gladiator bout that immediately commands the most attention in Antonio Romanucci's new River North office.

The piece shows an unprotected bald man, wearing a loincloth and holding a trident. He is matched against a larger man, covered in black armor, a helmet, mask, sword and shield.

To Romanucci, the armored man represents evil — what plaintiff lawyers like him perceive as the opponent — and the other gladiator represents justice.

"The defendants are always seen as protected and armored," he said. "It's really a figurative,

powerful representation when you go deep into it."

The acrylic painting, titled "Justice Prevails," has background characters including Lady Justice and an emperor preparing to make a judgment with a thumbs-up or thumbs-down. Artist Trevor Goring, Romanucci's friend, painted the piece with Romanucci in mind and gave him the original.

The painting is an allegory of Romanucci's work as a personal-injury attorney, but it also applies to his life outside the law — one he's dedicated to personally advocating for the defenseless and underprivileged.

As co-founder of Romanucci & Blandin, he's spent nearly three decades building a career as a go-to Chicago trial attorney. Over that period — from his years as an up-and-coming junior attorney to running his own successful practice — he's managed to carve out time outside of the office for civic, altruistic work.

For that, he will receive the Joseph Cardinal Bernardin Humanitarian of the Year Award this month from the Joint Civic Committee of Italian Americans.

Many successful attorneys realized from a very young age that the career was their destiny. Romanucci has no such perception of his



own beginnings with the law, but he admits that the kind of lawyer he became — and his service-focused mentality — was shaped by pivotal events in his young life.

#### **Paternal influence**

Born and raised in Chicago, Romanucci, 53, has called the city home his entire life, aside from an undergraduate stint at the University of Wisconsin and 14 years in Barrington, where he started a family in his early 30s.

The first seeds of practicing law were planted in high school, partly through encouragement from his speech-class teacher and partly through

the urging of his father, Dino, who with his mother, Anna, opened a series of Italian restaurants throughout Chicago, including Piccolo Mondo in Hyde Park.

Romanucci said he had a talent for breaking down complex issues, but one profound obstacle needed to be overcome — public speaking. He had to take an acting class in high school to get him past the hurdle. At UW-Madison, Romanucci majored in psychology, which he said also helped him ultimately be more effective in the courtroom.

“I felt like I had not so much a gift, but an ability to communicate,” he said. “In speech class,

when it came time for debating and presenting issues, not only was I good at it, but I also enjoyed it.”

While practicing law became a defined future for Romanucci in high school, his lifelong passion for helping others took shape during his first week of undergrad, when he agreed to help institutionalized schizophrenic patients re-enter society.

The program offered college credit and had students help patients with grocery shopping and job searches, among other needs. Romanucci worked with a man named Jeff, assisting him for four years rather than moving on after



# Romanucci > feature

one semester when he completed his credit work.

“Jeff affected me in a big way. That’s where my seeds were sown in realizing how important it is to give back to the community,” he said. “Working with him demonstrated to me that, though I grew up blue collar, I had a gift in that I was healthy and my parents were paying for me to go to a good school. I don’t know if I would have had as deep a commitment and passion for giving back if I’d never met Jeff.”

During his senior year, Romanucci worked at the Dane County Juvenile Detention Center as an assistant, helping young inmates with homework and engaging them in extracurricular activities.

“I didn’t even know I was going to be a personal-injury lawyer, but those two experiences provided me with a means to help people,” he said. “And I ultimately figured that if I was going to go into law, it wouldn’t be corporate or transactional.”

After graduating from The John Marshall Law School, Romanucci became a Cook County assistant public defender.

“I hate to say it was fun, but I looked forward to it every single day,” he said.

Working as a public defender allowed Romanucci to visit various police headquarters throughout the city. He said going into the “bullpen” — or the prisoner lockup area — was a character-building experience.

“The first time was a little scary, because that wasn’t really a lifestyle I knew,” he said. “I grew up hanging out a little on the streets, but not those kinds of streets.”

“I learned that when interacting and dealing with these people to never show fear. By having all the confidence in the world when I walked in and the door shut behind me in a room with 40, 50 prisoners, I know they had all the respect for me like I had respect for them.”

## A life’s career

Romanucci’s proper introduction to personal-injury work came after he left the public defender to join Richard F. Pellegrino Ltd. There, he began to build a career as a respected plaintiff lawyer.

Edward Ruff, managing partner at Pretzel & Stouffer, has opposed Romanucci in court many times.

“I consider Tony at the top of his field,” Ruff said. “He’s very accomplished and there’s a reasoned approach to how he handles things. He’s tough and aggressive, but there’s also not a lot of volatility.”

Ruff said Romanucci’s “fresh and innovative approach” to the practice separates him from his peers.

“There’s a number of times I’ve seen him bring innovative issues to a case and theories you might not commonly see proffered by opponents in traumatic brain-injury cases,” Ruff said.

The memory of Francis Fanelli, Romanucci’s best friend from high school, served to give him insights with personal-injury and workers’ compensation matters at Pellegrino.

Fanelli died as a teenager following multiple concussions from playing football; Romanucci said his death was among the first concussion cases in the 1970s that helped the medical community better understand how to handle them.

“At that time, the standard was to wake them up with smelling salts, have them count backwards and keep playing,” he said. “It was devastating watching him lay in a coma for two weeks before he died.”

Romanucci stayed with Pellegrino for three years before moving to what’s now known as Nolan Law Group, where he spent several years as an associate handling personal-injury and workers’ compensation cases.

Nolan also had an aviation practice, which Romanucci said made him reminisce about his childhood when his father worked at the airport, handling group sales for airline companies.

“I always had a fascination with planes, so when I worked with the office, my curiosity went even further,” he said.

There, Romanucci met Stephan Blandin, another associate at the firm. The two split off and started Romanucci & Blandin in 1998. After 15 years at 33 N. LaSalle St., the firm moved to 321 N. Clark St. in August.

“We moved partly because our lease was running out, but also because the firm has been growing the past few years,” Romanucci said of his operation, which now has seven attorneys and one of counsel.

“Our law firm is young and vibrant, and River North fits our image.”

## Working the ‘butterfly effect’

On Nov 9, Romanucci will receive the Bernardin Humanitarian of the Year award at the Holiday Inn Chicago Mart Plaza. The Joint Civic Committee of Italian Americans presents the award annually to “those whose lives exemplify the virtues of caring, humanity and goodwill that were the hallmark of Cardinal Bernardin’s tenure as Archbishop of Chicago,” its website says.

Romanucci was chosen not just for his career dedication to plaintiff work, but also because of his strident belief in the necessity of giving back to his community outside of work hours.

“I’m not the most fortunate person in the world, but I do have something. So by giving back, I can always enrich someone else’s life,” Romanucci said. “Plus, it makes me feel good. Leading by example is the right thing to do, for the benefit of my children and my firm.”

“The ‘butterfly effect’ is always working ... you flap your wings, someone else will do the same and, hopefully, it will trickle down.”

After leaving the public defender’s office, Romanucci became involved with the Constitutional Rights Foundation Chicago, a non-profit agency whose members volunteer to teach the Constitution to grade-level students. He’s worked with sixth- to eighth-graders in Chicago Public Schools throughout the city.

“To say that it was easy, I would be a liar,” he said. “It was really tough because some of the kids could give a rat’s butt about listening to you, but most of them cared most of the time.”

He said he learned through experience what a lot of teachers have to learn the hard way.

“They cared more when you role-play with them. You stand up in front and just lecture to them, you get nothing. But when you give examples of your work and interact with them, it worked out,” he said, explaining that he created courtroom scenarios and let the students act as prosecutors and defense attorneys.

Romanucci stopped volunteering with the foundation in the early 1990s in order to raise his children, Elizabeth and John. But a few years later, he played a pivotal role in establishing the Midwest Brain Injury Clubhouse, a facility that cares for adults suffering from brain injuries.

The clubhouse project was the idea of Deborah Giesler, who’d met Romanucci at a

golf outing and asked him if he would be interested in joining the organization's nascent board. She said the clubhouse, which is still open on 300 N. Elizabeth St., may never have gotten past the grass-roots stage without him.

"None of us knew what we were doing starting a nonprofit, but he was very passionate about the cause," Giesler said. "Tony became our leader and chairperson for many years. Funding was always poor in Illinois so we struggled at times to keep our doors open, but Tony was there to fix it and figure out what we needed to do."

Giesler continued: "Sometimes people get on a board just to network or get their company name out there, but he personally knew by name the people we worked with," Giesler said. "We had at times 70 to 100 clients and he knew them. And he brought more than just business colleagues — his whole family would be the first people to show up and chip in. He was always supportive and took it personally and made a strong connection with everybody."

Several prominent members of Chicago's legal community cite Romanucci's work with Chicago's Justinian Society of Lawyers, which primarily consists of Italian-Americans and, with more than 500 members, is one of the country's largest ethnic bar associations.

Leonard Amari, a member of the society and co-founder of real estate tax assessment firm Amari & Locallo, said Romanucci's accomplishments in and out of the courtroom speak for themselves.

"The successes he's had in representing the underprivileged and disenfranchised have led him to be extraordinarily respected in the profession and in the community," Amari said.

#### All about the kids

Romanucci was elected as president of the society for a one-year term in 2002. He used his presidency to create the Children's Endowment Fund, which offers grants annually to individual children or child-based organizations "regardless of race or background," he said.

He said that the members of the Justinian Society have a history of giving, but he sought to create a formal channel of fundraising that would be tied directly to the society.

Amari, who also knows Romanucci through

their work with the Joint Civic Committee of Italian Americans and other professional organizations, said Romanucci's natural charisma and sincere empathy has played a large part in the society collecting more than \$70,000 to date for the endowment fund.

"We've raised many, many thousands of dollars thanks to Tony's leadership and his intercession," he said. "When you meet him, you see he's a gentle person of sincere compassion. He takes strong positions as an advocate for clients, and he truly cares about the betterment of the American condition. ... That sets him apart."

Cook County Circuit Judge Lisa Marino recalled when Romanucci had a representative from Giant Steps, a Lisle-based child autism awareness and support organization, visit the Justinian Society of Lawyers in 2002. Because the endowment fund was brand new, it could only provide \$500 to Giant Steps in the first year.

She said Romanucci motivated other members to donate more, offering to match them out of his own pocket. The representative left with \$5,000 that evening.

"This is just the kind of guy he is," Marino said. "I've never seen him not open his heart to someone. ... I don't think I know someone who has as much energy and gives back more to the community than him."

Romanucci said the endowment fund contributed to an Illinois Eye Institute grant that was instrumental in saving a child's life. The grant, designed to help students with vision problems, was the only reason a specialist found a neuroblastoma in a student's eye that would have killed him if it went unchecked.

"Sometimes I tend to get emotional when I talk about kids, and that was an emotional moment," Romanucci said.

That feeling was visible when he discussed the case that remains the most memorable of his career: Kristie Talley, a 10-year-old who was found dead on a Carpentersville road in October 1996 after leaving her house to ride her bike to school with a friend.

"It was absolutely devastating to see the parents lose their only child," he said. "To her mother, she was the love of her life. (The family) was looking for answers and accountability."

Kristie suffered what was at the time a mysterious fatal vertebrae fracture; Romanucci

said the police and medical examiner determined it was a result of her falling from the bike without a helmet.

"That this girl was a safe bike rider and all of a sudden she would fall and break her neck with enough force to kill her. ... That answer was not acceptable to her family, and it was not acceptable to me," he said.

The Talley case became not just another checkmark on his docket, but an "absolute personal mission," he said.

"It was Kristie being 10, and one of my children being close to that age," he said. "The sadness they had over the loss of this life. ... It was simply about vindicating their daughter."

Romanucci and Blandin explored the case for five years, deconstructing and reconstructing every aspect of the scene and examining every inch of her bicycle for evidence. Very small burns on Kristie's book bag and a droplet of blood on her bike eventually revealed that she was struck by a passing school bus, which slammed her against the ground with fatal force.

Romanucci presented the new evidence to the medical examiner, who agreed with the firm's determination. Kristie's family was awarded \$6 million in Cook County Circuit Court, but only recovered a \$1.5 million settlement because the bus company went into bankruptcy.

"I don't think money could ever replace the life of a child," he said. "While there was a monetary aspect to the case, the primary one was vindicating this little girl, who was the only child of these parents who lost their most precious thing on earth."

Romanucci is keeping up with his own trend of advocating for young people: He's currently representing five Maine West High School students who are alleged victims in a highly publicized lawsuit involving a hazing ritual and sodomy on their soccer and baseball teams.

Working the case is just another step toward helping him accomplish the simple — yet not easily attainable — goal for his firm: "Make the world a safer and better place to live."

"It's what I want people to remember about me when I'm gone," he said. "That's the legacy I want to leave for my kids." ■

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