

Baseball Hero Inspires Pro Bono Work

By Donald F. Smith, Jr., Esquire

In 1972, an eleven-year old boy, growing up in Mansfield, Pennsylvania, idolized Roberto Clemente, the Pittsburgh Pirates all-star right-fielder. He found No. 21 to be a “joy to watch” and simply “admired him.”

On New Year’s Eve, December 31, 1972, after arranging for three relief flights from Puerto Rico to the earthquake stricken Managua, Nicaragua, only to learn they had been diverted by corrupt officials, Clemente decided to accompany a fourth flight to assure that the plane’s contents would be delivered to the survivors. Tragically, the plane crashed into the Atlantic Ocean shortly after taking off from Puerto Rico. There were no survivors.

The death of his boyhood hero, while on a mission of mercy, devastated the young Douglas S. Wortman. He was an avid reader from a young age, especially of history, thanks to being fed books by his grandmother. Following Clemente’s death, he read a biography of his idol. “I could not believe he suffered from racial discrimination, how he could not stay in the same hotel as his teammates, simply because of the pigment of his skin.” Learning that “instilled in me a sense of injustice that I have never lost,” explained Doug.

“It may sound corny, but Roberto Clemente’s life and death really inspired me. I have taken a Clemente quote to heart—‘If you have the ability to help others and you don’t, then you are wasting your time on this earth.’”

For Doug, that inspiration has translated into accepting *pro bono* challenges whenever asked, resulting in his being honored with the 2020 Pennsylvania Bar Association Pro Bono Award. In nominating him, Rebecca Dempsey, managing attorney of MidPenn Legal Services’ Reading office, wrote that Doug “has always gone above and beyond to help others by providing *pro bono* legal services to clients, making justice attainable to those in need.”

Pro Bono Coordinator Mariam Matias is so glad that Doug is receiving the Award. “A simple ‘thank you’ is not enough for him. I hope he understands how much he is valued and appreciated, for all the times he has gone the extra mile to help clients.”

In 2019, Doug provided *pro bono* representation to obtain a guardianship for two children, whose mother had been in an accident, after the client had been turned down everywhere else. He also took on multiple child custody cases last year, when most attorneys in the Berks *Pro Bono* Program will only take one, if any. “I never want to see

a parent *pro se* in child custody litigation,” says Doug. “Going without an attorney is a mess because, with their children being involved, emotions are too raw.”

Doug draws upon his own personal experience, being very young when his parents divorced as well as with his own first marriage ending in divorce after he and his wife had three children. “I find having attorneys involved means it is not as ugly and is easier for the children, the court and the parties. I learned from my own life experience that it is best to accept the change, focus on the best interest of the children and move on; my role as an attorney is to help the parents achieve that stage in life as well.”

Law was not Doug’s first career or second or third. After graduating from high school, Doug moved to Colorado where he worked several years as a ski instructor in the winter and then as a bartender during the summer months.

Thereafter, returning to Mansfield, he resumed bartending, until one day, his stepfather, a Command Sergeant-Major serving in Army at the time, ordered him into his car, whereupon he drove Doug to the military recruiting office. He joined the Air Force on the spot. “It was the best thing that ever happened to me.”

Doug scored one of the highest scores ever on the entrance exam, allowing him to pick any field within which to serve. The new recruit chose to be a Soviet analyst in military intelligence. “It sounded both interesting and challenging and meant working with the Special Forces.”

He served for five years in active duty and attended night school at Christopher Newport College in Virginia during that time. After his discharge and while serving in the USAF Reserve, Doug attended Kutztown University, majoring in Russian and Slavic Studies. The plan was to build upon what he learned in the Air Force and then work for the Central Intelligence Agency following graduation. An offer was extended by the Agency but was then rescinded following the breakup of the Soviet Union. At that point, the CIA’s attention had turned to the Middle East, and its need to hire those fluent in Arabic, and not Russian.

Shifting goals, Doug entered graduate school at East Stroudsburg University where he earned a master’s degree in history, hoping to become a college professor. However, he quickly learned that a MA did not constitute a terminal degree, and he could not find employment at any public or private non-profit university. Nevertheless, Doug believes his grad school experience “paid for itself many times over. It is where I really learned how to write.”

He is especially proud of the thesis he wrote as part of his graduate studies, titled “Napoleon and Alexander the First from Tilsit to Waterloo.” Standing in front of the class after completing each chapter of the paper, and having to accept criticism of his work as well as praise, was not only “humbling but quite a learning experience.”

With graduate school not resulting in a professorship, but having a wife and children, Doug went to work at his father-in-law’s Industrial Supply Company as a sales representative. He stuck it out for twelve years, but, he shared, “I hated it. I was not good at selling.”

Not happy with this third career and, in time, being a divorced father with primary custody of his children, he decided on a new career goal—the law. His mother had died, leaving him enough of an inheritance to pay the tuition, and, thus, he entered night school at Widener University Commonwealth Law School. Doug saw becoming a lawyer as a way “to help people and society, directly impacting people’s lives.”

Following graduation, Doug practiced with firms in Bucks and Lehigh Counties before settling in Berks with Liberty Law Group in 2016. He is now a principal in the same firm but one with a different, new name—Community Law Office. In addition to family law, his practice includes landlord-tenant issues, ARD and license suspensions, with plans to expand into bankruptcy.

It has been 48 years since the death of Roberto Clemente. The injustice the Hall of Fame ballplayer endured and the example he set for helping those in need continue to inspire Douglas S. Wortman. Attorney Dempsey writes, “Mr. Wortman has never said no when asked to represent a client as part of the *pro bono* program. Those clients have highly praised the work he did on their behalf.”

He has found his calling. No. 21 would be proud.