

HCBA Speech re 2014 Annual Meeting

Thank you - - that's very kind of you. I am honored to stand before you as President of the Hartford County Bar Association, the oldest bar association in the United States.

I want to thank a number of people for coming tonight. First, I'd like to thank our keynote speaker, John Dean, Counsel to President Richard M. Nixon, for agreeing to share with us an insider's view of a pivotal chapter in American history.

Thanks to all of the judges here tonight for coming, as well as to my fellow lawyers, colleagues and friends. Thanks to Jan Ambruso, the Director of the HCBA, and to the other HCBA staff members who have worked so hard to make tonight's program a success. Thanks to my secretary of over 20 years, Paula Luna, for always "having my back." And finally, thanks to my devoted family. I could never have gotten this far in life without the support and devotion of my wife, Lisa DeRenzo. And to my daughters, Carrie, Anne and Sarah – I may be up here in a tuxedo giving a speech, but being your father will always be my proudest achievement.

I want to congratulate the Association's out-going President, Jamie Sullivan, on a fine job this past year. And I'd like to acknowledge and congratulate my fellow officers, whom Jamie has already introduced, as well as my friend, Mike Kurs, the newly elected President of the Hartford County Bar *Foundation*. I'm looking forward to working with you all to make this coming year a successful one for both the Association and the Foundation.

Those of you who know me well will not be surprised to learn that I've been thinking about this speech for some time. I really wanted to get it just right. So I asked my long-time friend and business partner, Paul Zolan, for his advice. What Paul told me was very simple. He said, "It doesn't matter so much *what* you say; just don't say it for *too long*!" I will try to follow Paul's sage advice tonight

The theme of my comments tonight is "Taking Stock." Usually, when we lawyers talk about "stock," we are referring to an ownership interest in a corporation. Well, tonight I'd like for us all to take a moment to think about our investment, individually and collectively, in the Hartford County Bar

Association. Let's take a few minutes to reflect and take stock of where we are individually; and where we, as a bar association, are all headed.

I have been "taking stock" of my own life over the past few months. My mother died a few years ago, and my father, who was 90, died last August. I turned 60 last October. Naturally enough, that led to a lot of soul-searching, including thinking about being here tonight, assuming the presidency of this historic association, and about what it means to me.

Of course, we all have our own stories of how we came to be at this particular place at this particular time. Please indulge me for a few minutes as I relate the short version of how I came to be a lawyer, and how our keynote speaker, John Dean, played a part in it all, in a back-handed sort of way.

When I was graduating from college in June, 1975, lawyers were not the media darlings they are today. America's most beloved talk show host, Johnny Carson, poked fun almost nightly at his attorney, "Bombastic Bushkin," and just about everyone - - including lawyers - - was telling the latest irreverent lawyer jokes.

President Nixon, who was a lawyer himself (of course), had resigned the previous year - - 40 years ago this August. (Can you believe it's been that long?) The Watergate hearings had rocked the country and left most Americans fairly disenchanted with the colorful cast of characters, many of whom were lawyers - - President Nixon, Attorney General John Mitchell, and staff members John Ehrlichman and Bob Haldeman, just to name a few. As the prosecution's star witness, former White House Counsel John Dean gave compelling testimony - - but that was not enough to lift the pall that the proceedings had cast over lawyers generally. My parents thought that I should seriously consider law school upon graduation from college, but after a summer of watching lawyer after lawyer being pummeled by Senator Sam Ervin and the media, I was in no hurry to join the ranks of those at the bar.

I was a 21-year old Cultural Anthropology major, and my career options were a bit limited. I had worked at a variety of jobs growing up. Like many of you, I started out shoveling neighbors' driveways for 20 bucks a pop; then, among other jobs, I was a golf caddy, a playground instructor and a warehouseman. (I was a dues-paying member of the Teamsters back when everyone actually *did* know where Jimmy Hoffa was!) I worked in a

bronze foundry the summer after my junior year in college, and I enjoyed getting my hands and clothes dirty every day - - but I knew working in a foundry was not my life's calling. I had also done some student-teaching in college, and I figured that I could teach school for a living somewhere. But, after studying economic determinism for several years, I was skeptical that a course like "Introduction to Marxism" would be a hit with the local school board.

One of my roommates decided to take the federal civil service exam, and that sounded liked a smart idea to me. I went along with him one freezing Saturday morning in February, and took the exam without studying for it. My roommate ended up in something like the 99th percentile, and went on to forge a successful career with the federal government for almost 40 years. As for my results - - well, I did not do quite so well.

Eventually, however, I *was* offered three jobs with the United States government. One, I could become a customs inspector at the border in Nogales, New Mexico, poking around in the trunks of people's cars. Or two, I could be a fruit inspector in the orchards of Visalia, California, otherwise not-too-affectionately known as "Nowheresville USA." Or, three, I could become an air traffic controller at a tiny airstrip in Northern Michigan. But I didn't see myself enjoying a career as an inspector of car trunks or fruit flies, or as a director of Piper Cub air traffic.

With options so limited, I bit the bullet and decided to go back home to work for a small law firm. "Home" was Sharon, Pennsylvania, a tired, gray steel town in Western Pennsylvania, just across the Ohio line from Youngstown - - and not too far from Akron, OH where LeBron James and - oh yes - John Dean were both born. To picture Sharon PA in 1971, just imagine that gray and depressing steel town where the movie "The Deer Hunter" took place. I think that was actually filmed in Weirton, WV, but Sharon was just like that.

I went to work for a small firm of just a few lawyers, a general practice firm. I was a "go-fer." I'd drive to the county seat in the tiny county seat of Mercer PA and file court papers, or accompany one of the lawyers doing title bring downs. For lunch every day, we'd head on over to the old Sharon Hotel and play gin rummy for money. The stakes were modest; I usually ended up buying my own hamburger and someone else's, and a cherry Coke for each of us.

But spending a few months as a go-fer in that modest law firm in that broken-down steel town taught me something important. I came to realize that those small-town lawyers were working hard and making an honest living solving the very real problems of everyday citizens who badly needed their help. Those small town lawyers seemed to be doing something worlds apart from the Haldemans, and Ehrlichmans down in Washington DC. That meant a lot to me, and it got me thinking. To my surprise (and my parents' relief), I ended up applying to law school the following year.

After graduating from law school, I went to work for a firm in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. Then I came to Hartford in 1986 to work for Rogin Nassau, and never left.

And I have never really looked back or wished it had gone differently. My wife and I have made West Hartford our home for 28 years. We've been happy to raise our daughters here, and Hartford really feels like "home" to us.

Now things have pretty much come full circle, from my first rejecting the idea of becoming a lawyer, in the wake of Watergate, to standing here, after 35 years as a lawyer, about to introduce John Dean himself.

But first, let me return to my theme of "taking stock" for a couple of minutes. Being a lawyer is *hard*; I've learned over the years that practicing law is a tough, tough business. As lawyers, we hold ourselves to very high standards of competence, civility and professionalism every day of our working lives. It is stressful, and sometimes seems burdensome. Good lawyering requires sacrifice and commitment, oftentimes forgoing personal activities and hobbies, and spending time away from family and loved ones.

It is rare that something worth doing comes easily. To quote Hyman Roth from The Godfather, Part II: "***This*** is the ***business*** we've chosen!" As hard as it may be at times, we're all committed to this work and to the high standards it requires, both personally and professionally.

As I mentioned, the HCBA is the oldest chartered bar association in the country. As you all know, the Association provides many services and amenities to its members, among them offering informative, low-cost continuing education programs; engaging in community outreach initiatives

and public relations efforts; giving young and not-so-young lawyers opportunities to get together socially to relax and enjoy themselves; providing a liaison with the judiciary; and engendering a spirit of mutual support, collegiality and professionalism among all local lawyers.

But the HCBA cannot exist without your support and the support of others at your law firms. We need to keep our membership rolls filled and keep paying our dues, both literally and figuratively, to the HCBA. The HCBA's Director, Jan Ambruso, is known to most of you – and there could be no better steward of any such organization anywhere. But Jan and her staff, and the HCBA officers and board members, need your help and your support to continue to have the Association be a landmark organization.

In uncertain economic times, lawyers, like everyone else, look to cut costs; and too often they decide to let their bar association dues slide - - maybe for a month or two, maybe for six months or even a year. They justify this by telling themselves they'll make it up the next year, or that they have no real choice; they convince themselves that bar association membership is a *luxury* rather than a professional imperative. But we must remember that bar associations *represent* us - - *all of us* - - and act as liaisons to the judiciary, the legislature and the public. They put our best face forward and do charitable work for the community through their affiliated foundations. And of course, they assist us with continuing legal education programs at a reasonable cost. In a very real sense, our associating on a regular basis with other lawyers, whether at social events or CLE programs, is what keeps us focused on our professionalism and all that it entails, and that's what makes us all kindred spirits of those earnest and dedicated lawyers in Sharon PA that I got to know and respect 40 years ago.

Tonight - - in "taking stock" - - I'd like us all to recommit to supporting the HCBA in every way possible, including our collective and individual financial commitment. If we can substantially improve the HCBA's financial condition and give the Association a bit of economic "breathing room" over the course of the next year, then I will have done my job as President. I'm personally committed to trying to fill the HCBA coffers; and if I can achieve that, I will have met my goal for the year.

Thank you. I'd now like to move on to presentation of the HCBA's President's Award for Excellence to one of Hartford's best known, best liked, and most esteemed lawyers. (see Fran Brady remarks).