



Danbury lawyer still practicing at 81

Nov. 23--DANBURY -- Americo S. "Rick" Ventura has a ready answer when asked why he's still practicing law at the age of 81.

"What else am I going to do?" he said. "I can't go to church every morning."

For Ventura, a typical workday begins at 7 a.m. when he arrives at the offices of Ventura, Ribeiro and Smith on Main Street.

Some days, he's the first person to arrive. On others, he admits, a secretary may get there before he does.

It's a regimen he's been following for 51 years, ever since he passed the bar in 1957 and returned to his hometown to open his practice.

Most of the attorneys who were active when he started have long since retired, become judges, or passed on, but Ventura, the son of a hard-working fruit market owner, is still representing clients, some of whom are the children and grandchildren of people whose legal affairs he handled when he was a young lawyer.

In fact, Ventura's father, Jack, was responsible for one of his son's first clients.

Ventura's Market used to be located in the area known as Portuguese Square, and one day, his father saw a man trip and fall on the sidewalk on the other side of the street.

After rushing over and helping the bleeding man up, Jack Ventura handed him a handkerchief, and his son's business card.

"I still represent the family," Rick Ventura said proudly.

As Danbury's first Portuguese lawyer, Ventura was soon in demand by people who had emigrated from Portugal and their families, for a very simple reason.

"No other attorney spoke Portuguese," he said. "I was busy from day one."

Over the years, Ventura has partnered with several other pioneering Danbury attorneys. His ex-wife, Dianne Andersen, was the first female lawyer in the city, and another former partner, Thomas West, who later became a Superior Court judge, was Danbury's first black attorney.

Today, Ventura, Ribeiro and Smith is one of the largest law firms in the city, specializing in personal injury cases.

"He never looks at a client like a number. Every one is a story," said Aghostino Ribeiro, one of his partners. "People pick up on that, and what comes back is a referral of their friends and families."

Ventura, who has three children -- two daughters and a son -- has also been active in the community, and served as a role model for many young men of Portuguese extraction, said Dave Coelho, who chairs the city's annual Portuguese Day Parade.

"He was a person to look up to when you were growing up," Coelho said. "He's also a wealth of information on Portuguese history, including the old-timers who lived in Danbury."

Several years ago, after the Portuguese Cultural Center was opened on Sandpit Road in the city, Ventura donated his collection of Portuguese history books, and the library there is named in his honor, Coelho said.

Ventura played a major role convincing the Bridgeport Diocese to authorize the establishment of the Immaculate Heart of Mary Church on Deer Hill Avenue, said longtime friend Manny Cipriano, who also worked on the project.

"We tried to get the church for years," Cipriano said.

Earlier this year, Ventura was honored by the Portuguese Bar Association at a dinner that drew more than 200 people, including Connecticut Attorney General Richard Blumenthal.

Ventura said he imagines there are some people who are amazed he is still practicing law.

"I really have had some great days and some rotten days, but on the whole, it's been good for me," he said.

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