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## Tommy Neidl's passing brings grief, praise

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Bumping into Tommy Neidl made your day, and it didn't matter whether he'd regale you with his latest off-color joke or confide in you about a downtrodden defendant he wanted to do right by.

For more than 30 years, the attorney was a fixture on downtown streets and in courtrooms. Those who worked with him and loved him said the justice system just won't be the same.

Neidl died last week and hundreds who filled St. Mary's Church in downtown for his funeral laughed and cried with eulogizers. No one wanted to let go of the Tom Neidl who was special to all.

Longtime colleague and friend Albany City Court Judge Will Carter talked about the time he joined the DA's office and heard stories of the legendary Neidl as a prosecutor for DA Sol Greenberg and as a prankster.

Neidl was revered "as the man who indicted defendants in six questions or less," Carter said. Later, as deputy chief of criminal prosecutions in the state AG's office, Neidl hired Carter.

Neidl was known for his "sense of fairness and right from wrong," the judge said. He was "a warrior and craftsmen in the courtroom" and "one of the most talented."

Choking up and apologizing for his tears, Carter finished with, "Life will go on Tom, but it will never be the same, never be as good." James Banagan, who works for DA David Soares and succeeded Neidl as head of Greenberg's drug unit, remarked, "Like the obituary said, everybody had a Tommy Neidl story, but if you were really, really lucky, you had 25 Tommy Neidl stories. He never touched anyone's life in a negative manner."

As a prosecutor, Neidl was tough. As a defense lawyer, he was caring, and in each role he came to court fully prepared and ready for battle.

At the Daniel Keenan Funeral Home, his family laid out Neidl's collection of pocket knives and his "tools of the trade" -- prosecutor's badges, beeper, legal pad, appointment book, Thomas J. Neidl Attorney At Law stamp, newspaper clippings and a stamp from the Public Defender's Office where Neidl was a full-time assistant.

Greenberg said Neidl was top quality and "an unusual person. He was a great winner and a great loser. ... He never bragged about winning, and he was never resentful about losing." He "was the type of individual you could bet your bottom dollar on."

Attorney Ben Neidl of the Albany firm of Tabner Ryan and Keniry, opened his eulogy with, "I'm one of four people in the world lucky enough to call Tom Neidl Dad."

The oldest of four children of Neidl and his wife of 35 years, Linda, said his father had the "magical ability to make things seem all right."

His dad was genuine. "There was not a phony bone in his body. If you were going to win Dad's respect, you had to do it on merit." Status and titles meant nothing.

His caring and compassion was "a good thing and a curse," his son said. "Everyone's pain was his pain."

His father was drawn to "underdog stories and one of his favorite movies was the original Rocky," Ben said. He recalled the time as a young boy, his dad took him to an uncle's house -- the Neidl family didn't have a VCR -- to watch the Rocky video. The kid thought it strange since there was no one home at the uncle's and his father took him out on a school night.

His father fast-forwarded to the fight scene at the end and re-played it at least two dozen times, the son said. As a youngster he didn't understand what it was all about or why his dad loved that movie.

Much later, however, he got it. The movie was about "not giving up, fighting on no matter how dark or despairing things may get. Every day he got back in the fight, he threw punches and he broke the champ's ribs" he said of his father.

The Rev. Kenneth Doyle, pastor of St. Catherine of Siena, where the Neidls worshipped, celebrated the Mass of Christian burial with the Rev. James Lefebvre, St. Mary's pastor.

Referring to a gospel passage that Christ went about doing good, the priest said that also "can sum up Tom's life."

He called Neidl "unfailingly funny" and mourners roared. "He had a gift to make people laugh," Doyle said. And, "Tommy Neidl has won his last case, the big one."

Attorney hired

Demostene Romanucci, a seasoned family court lawyer, has been hired as the first full-time attorney in the Schenectady County Conflict Defender's Office. His addition should save taxpayers rising legal fees doled out to outside lawyers, according to Steven X. Kouray, who heads the office.

Earlier this week, the Niskayuna resident said he was eager to get down to work helping the needy. "It's a chance for professional development and to defend people who are underserved and the underdog," Romanucci said.

He will be paid \$53,361 annually in the position he started today.

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His caseload will include abuse and neglect, as well as those accused of not paying child support and those involved in custody disputes who can't afford legal representation.

"It's a chance to give back and be a part of my community," said Romanucci, who practiced in family court for 17 years. He previously served as special prosecutor for Child Protective Services.

The conflict defender's office handles cases where a conflict exists with the public defender's office that represents a co-defendant or witness in a criminal case. Albany and Rensselaer counties also have such offices.

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