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Amicus Curious

Law school finds a champion in an alum

By Pat Milhizer

Law Bulletin staff writer

Leonard F. Amari got through his first semester of law school with enough strikes against him to make the chances of getting a degree look like a long shot.

He didn't have the grades. Didn't have the writing skills. Didn't have the money.

What he did have was a spot on The John Marshall Law School's probation list.

"I got a B, two Cs, three Ds and an F. So my second semester, in my mind, I was going to flunk out. I wasn't going to make it. Not with those kinds of grades," Amari said.

"And they didn't teach you how to write as an undergraduate. So when you go to law school and it's all essays, you don't know how to write, so I was at a disadvantage. I couldn't write a coherent sentence," Amari said.

Then, it just sort of clicked.

One day, he asked a classmate how to approach an exam, and his peer told him to write it like a judicial opinion.

"All of a sudden I had a structure. From that point on I didn't get a grade lower than A," Amari said.

To help him pay tuition bills, John Marshall professors helped him get jobs at the law library, a paralegal school and a restaurant. Then the school waived his tuition for his last three semesters.

In 1968, he graduated third in his class.

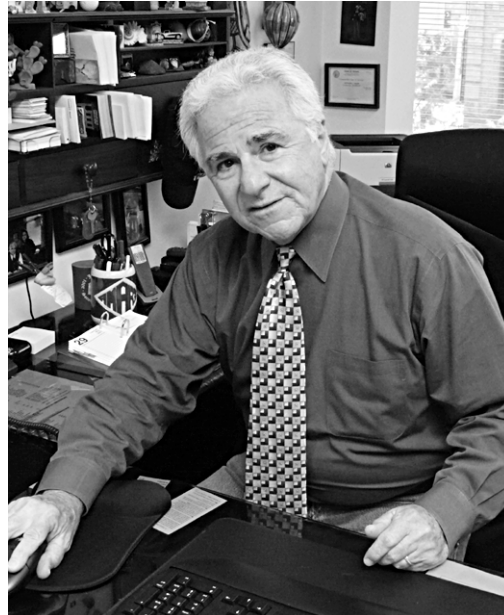
Now Amari, 65, a senior partner at the real estate tax firm of Amari & Locallo, plans to give back to the school that gave him so much. This month, he accepted an appointment to be president of the school's board of trustees.

"It was the first time in my life," Amari said about his time at John Marshall, "that I was anything other than average. When I was in grammar school, I was the smartest kid in the dumb row. Or the dumbest kid in the smart row."

The Italian-American kid grew up in the Chicago housing projects of Cabrini-Green and Lathrop Homes, the son of a father who Amari said didn't have a "traditional employment situation" and a mother who supported the family as a beautician.

"My father was a Damon Runyon character. But he always instilled in all of us the importance of going to school," Amari said.

"I could do anything and never get in any



Paul McGrath

Leonard F. Amari

trouble except when I did badly in school. If I got check marks on my report card — remember those check marks? Practices self control, plays well with others," Amari said, ticking off the social skills that would cost him some old-school fatherly discipline if they weren't done well.

"That's because the immigrants, the children of immigrants, only knew the way to matriculate into society was through education. So my father was insistent that I stay in school," Amari said.

For as long as Amari can remember, his father told people that his son would become a lawyer, knowing that the boy had a knack for being gregarious and charismatic. In other words, Amari can really talk.

"He could have probably sold you the Brooklyn Bridge in an hour," said longtime friend Warren Lupel, an attorney with Lupel, Weininger LLP. "And with all my heart, I really mean it, he could teach marketing at Harvard. There just is no one better."

Amari is the type of guy who doesn't forget a name, whether it's the classmate who told him how to write law school essays or the groundskeeper at

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Wrigley Field who let him ride go-carts down the stadium ramps when he was a boy and the Cubs were on a road trip.

Amari spent countless afternoons at Wrigley Field, especially after his family moved near the park in 1954 when he was in grammar school. This was back in the days when newspaper deliverymen would give pencils and scorecards to the youngsters waiting on Clark and Addison, so the kids could sell them to buy hotdogs.

And game tickets were always free because Amari had helped pick up trash and fold up the seats the day before.

“We were like season pass holders,” Amari said.

He attended high school at the now-closed DePaul Academy and went to Northern Illinois University, where he now serves on the board of visitors of the law school. He met his wife, Donna Strobel Amari, while he was heading into his third year of law school. She worked at a Chicago Bureau of Tourism booth at the Daley Center.

The South Side girl knocked him off his feet, literally.

“I looked at her — cute, blond, WASPish-lookin’ German,” Amari said. “And I slipped.”

Fortunately, Amari said, his friend Lupel was there to make sure he didn’t fall.

“It took me the whole summer to get enough [courage] to talk to this woman. One day toward the end of summer, in late August, [Chief Cook County Judge Timothy C.] Evans was talking to her, so I made off like I was going there to talk to him. And he introduces me to her,” Amari said.

The two have been married for 37 years and have two daughters.

After graduating from John Marshall, Amari started his own practice because there “weren’t too many jobs for a short Sicilian-American with no connections,” he said. He later formed a firm with Lupel and handled mostly commercial litigation and some personal-injury cases.

“But I got fed up with it. That’s tough duty,” Amari said. “It’s why there are so many trial lawyers who like to drink.”

By 1982, Amari changed gears. He had already established a few political connections and was a friend of attorneys Thomas C. Hynes and Joseph Gordon.

It had started in 1967, when Gordon, now an appellate court justice, recruited Amari and some of his law school classmates to help work on the grassroots campaign for Hynes’ state senate race.

Hynes won, and every election after that, Amari served on his finance committee. Hynes became the Cook County assessor, and in 1982, Amari took a salary cut to learn real estate law and

become the office’s general counsel.

He left the office after three years and started his own practice to help businesses and homeowners trim some dollars off their property tax bills.

These days, he’s the rainmaker.

“I don’t have to work anymore. You know why I come to work at this office? All of these kids,” he said, referring to the lawyers and staff he supervises in a building on Wells and Superior streets.

“And they’re all kids to me, including my law partner who’s probably 55 years old,” Amari said. “They treat me with respect. You know how nice that is?”

Amari is a past president of the Illinois State Bar Association, Justinian Society of Lawyers and the Lawyers Trust Fund of Illinois. He joined the board of trustees at John Marshall in 2000 to give back to the school and help students get into the school.

Throughout his career, he has helped many college graduates get into law school, assisted lawyers in job searches and recruited attorneys to leadership roles in various organizations.

In his new role at the school, Amari hopes to help John Marshall improve its law school ranking, construct a new building and keep the bar passage rate above the state average.

“I’m convinced that the school will greatly benefit by his presence in the office of president,” said Lupel, who is a member of the board of trustees. “He is a man who devotes himself to the things that he thinks are right.

“People in three environments — the Italian-America community, the bar associations and the law school — all know Leonard because his presence is so demonstrative. It is so apparent he is there to do good,” Lupel said.

In his spare time, Amari likes to go to Cubs games, travel around the world with his wife or take in a movie. His movie collection dates back to 1972, meaning that he has a copy of some of the same flicks on Beta, VHS and DVD.

He also has a spiritual side, though he said it might sound naive to some. He believes his mother became a saint after she died, helping him achieve his success.

On his way to a recent Justinian Society golf outing, his daughter Katherine A. Amari, who works at his firm, told him that she was proud of him.

“And I said something I shouldn’t have said. I said ‘I’m proud of myself.’ It’s a little vain,” Amari said. “Also, if you say stuff like that, the Lord will bite you on the ass.”