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A Good Shepherd for Special People

It is said that everything happens for a reason, that the highest destiny of the individual is to serve rather than to rule, and that each man is the architect of his own fate. Just ask Rosslyn Farms resident John D'Onofrio who knows all too well the truth behind such sentiments.

John grew up in a large family of nine that included six sisters. Raised in a two-bedroom housing project apartment in Erie, John grew to appreciate the value of hard work and life's little blessings. He slept on the family's couch until he was 15 years old, when his father was then able to purchase a four-bedroom house and move the family out of the projects.

At eleven years old, John began working as a golf caddy at a country club where he gradually formed friendships with many of the doctors and lawyers who golfed there. As these club members began to get to know John better, they decided to finance his college education—without expecting any payback in return—as they believed in him and wanted to provide him with the best opportunities available. The only catch: John had to “pay it forward” by doing good for others in the future.

With this reciprocity in mind, John went on to attend Mercyhurst College in Erie and law school in Houston, Texas at South Texas College of Law. There he received his Juris Doctorate in 1981.

John worked in the Grand Jury Division of the Harris County District Attorney's Office in Houston immediately upon graduating law school. In 1985, he started his own private practice in Houston taking criminal cases, accident cases, bankruptcies, and estate planning. During this time, when a family came to John for estate planning and they had a special needs child, John would provide his services free of

charge.

However, in 1987 John experienced a twist of fate that forever changed his outlook when an accident left him with a bulging disc in his neck and back and a

lower brain-stem injury that resulted in the return of a childhood stutter, which had previously been controlled through therapy. After the accident, John moved to Pittsburgh and underwent numerous months of physical and speech therapy, which he credits with providing him with a better understanding and appreciation of what special needs families must deal with.

“When I first started my practice, my main goal was to see how much money I could make,” recalls John. “After my accident, my focus shifted from how much money I could make to how many people I could help.”

And, so came the time for John to begin to pay it forward.

When John started practicing law in Pittsburgh after his therapy, he mainly concentrated in bankruptcy law and estate planning. Once again, John would provide estate planning to

families of special needs children free of charge.

In 2007, John formed the Good Shepherd Legal Foundation (GSLF), a non-profit 501(c)(3) organization dedicated to providing complimentary legal services through licensed attorneys to the families of children with special needs. These legal services include specialized estate planning, special needs trusts, last will and testaments, guardianship, and the preparation of necessary legal documents applicable to a special needs family.

“My goal is to help as many special needs families as possible, one family at a time,” says John. “The



ABOVE: John D'Onofrio, back, with clients Daniel Hentosz, his wife, Brenda, and their daughter, Angelina. They are from Upper St. Clair.



“My goal is to help as many special needs families as possible, one family at a time.”

-- John D’Onofrio

foundation does this at no cost to the family, which really takes the pressure off these children’s parents who often don’t know how to find an attorney who deals with this type of work.”

Located in Moon Township, GSLF offers assistance to families of all income levels, and anyone with a special needs child automatically qualifies for these services. All they have to do is ask John, who personally pays for all operating expenses and administrative costs of running his foundation, including the rent, telephones, office supplies, advertising and marketing costs, and printing costs.

Even more remarkable is that these special needs families pay nothing for these services. Funds or no funds, the work is still done for free. If the foundation has funds available, the foundation will pay 80% of the attorney’s invoice on behalf of the family; if the foundation does not have funds available John still provides the legal services at no cost to the family.

“Being a good shepherd means being a good steward, protector, and provider,” explains John. “God gave me certain talents and I feel that I have a duty and an obligation to use them to help others in need.”

One Moon area family experienced firsthand the altruistic support that John’s foundation provides shortly after returning from a recent trip to Chicago where they attended a seminar that focused on managing the day-to-day pressures of caring for special needs children. It was there that this family, whose daughter was diagnosed with a rare seizure disorder, heard a speaker explaining the benefits of special needs trusts.

Several weeks later, the father heard a local radio commercial for GSLF, which promised free legal services to families of children with special needs. Recalling what he had learned in Chicago, he wrote down the foundation’s telephone number despite his wife’s initial reservations about any attorney who guaranteed free legal services.

Peace of mind soon replaced this family’s concerns. With John’s assistance, the family received a comprehensive estate plan that included a Special Needs Trust. The family ultimately purchased a \$14,000 seizure dog that is trained to detect the signs of an impending

seizure and alert the family by barking, making it possible for their little girl to sleep in her own room without the fear that she would be alone and powerless during a seizure.

Recently, John was recognized when he was nominated and selected as a recipient of the 2009 Jefferson Award. Established by Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis in 1972 as part of a national volunteer recognition program, this award recognizes volunteers in the community in conjunction with the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, Highmark, The Heinz Endowments, and The Pittsburgh Foundation.

John will be honored with his photograph and an advertisement in the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* highlighting his volunteer work with GSLF, as well as a February 2010 reception and ceremony. There, he will be honored with the Jefferson Award and considered for Pittsburgh’s Most Outstanding Volunteer and the opportunity to represent the western Pennsylvania region at a national awards ceremony to be held June 2010 in Washington D.C.

Until then, John hopes to expand the foundation through a network of licensed attorneys in a five-state area that includes Pennsylvania, Ohio, New York, New Jersey, and West Virginia while continuing to accomplish its mission of serving families of special needs children on a no-cost basis.

“We rely on solicited donations and all monies donated to the foundation go directly toward the foundation services—legal fees at a discounted rate to various attorneys for preparing the documents or for appearing in Court for Guardianship hearings,” emphasizes John. “The more the foundation can raise in funds, the more families we can help. Our ultimate goal would be to have a major charity or corporation be a benefactor of GSLF through a one-time major gift or through a series of continuing gifts.”

Anyone interested in donating to GSLF can do so via PayPal or credit card by visiting www.goodshepherdlegalfoundation.org or by mailing a check directly to the foundation’s office located at 500 Commerce Drive, Suite 110, Moon Township, PA 15108.