

# Chicago Daily Law Bulletin

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## The most successful person

*By Jeffrey J. Kroll*

"For a long time it had seemed to me that life was about to begin — real life. But there was always some obstacle in the way, something to be gotten through first; some unfinished business, time still to be served or a debt to be paid. Then life would begin. At last it dawned on me that these obstacles were my life." — Alfred D. Souza.

On Oct. 24, I — like many of us — lost a dear friend, one of the best. At 44 years old, John T. Karnezis died way too young. Not only did I lose a great buddy that morning, but his premature death has been a real wake-up call for me.

What really is important in life? The past few weeks, filled with hazy days and thick with memories, have provided quite a bit of time to ponder that question. Lost in thought, I find myself reflecting on the qualities that made John so special as a friend and lawyer. There are moments when I am laughing, thinking about something hilarious John said. Then, when reality hits — and it hits hard — an overwhelming sadness fills my day. I miss my friend. His death is a reminder that the duration of one's life can be fragile and uncertain. I write now in homage to John.

John's life began on the South Side of Chicago. The foundation of the thriving Karnezis clan came from a belief in faith, family and friends. Those core values shaped John, not only into an outstanding human being, but into a premier trial lawyer.

I first met John when we were teenagers at Marist High School. Two years younger than me, he played sophomore football while I played varsity. Although we were never teammates, his reputation as a force on the playing field with the potential for greatness did not elude me. Neither did his loud, echoing voice!

Thankfully, years later, I had the privilege of trying cases with him over a period of seven years. In fact, John and I tried his first civil trial together. After years as an assistant Cook County state's attorney in the heart of criminal law at 26th Street, he was eager for a noncriminal jury trial.

I vividly remember the night before closing arguments. Tying up loose ends after

weeks of preparation, we stopped at The Berghoff to grab a bite and a few beers, and to discuss our plans for closing. We decided that I would present the opening close and he would handle rebuttal. I remember his excitement about rebuttal. Apparently, rebuttal was a big deal in the state's attorney's office, but, in my experience at least, less so in civil cases.

John had crafted his entire rebuttal argument around the word "B-E-L-I-E-V-E," each letter meriting a long and passionate explanation why the jury should find in favor of our client. When he got to "E," we were 30 minutes in, and beads of sweat were starting form on my hairline. I was concerned. After he finally concluded and sat down, he asked, "How did I do?" I told him, "Thank God you didn't choose the word M-I-S-S-I-S-S-I-P-P-I." We laughed about that for years. John's sense of humor never disappointed.

I've never met anyone as caring as John either. He had a unique way of making everyone feel important, which I believe derived from his genuine care and concern for others.

He represented thousands of victims while at the state's attorney's office and during his private practice. He always focused complete attention on whomever he spoke to; never manipulating anyone to get to someone "more important." There was no "more important" when it came to others in John's book.

When he talked with anyone, he approached the conversation with a palpable sense of care for the circumstances of the other person's life. This attribute made him a champion of his client's causes. In a society that dislikes and distrusts lawyers — where trial lawyers' trustworthiness falls somewhere near used-car salesmen — John's care for others may be measured by the fact that droves of his former clients attended his funeral.

John had an uncanny ability to connect with all types of people from construction workers to CEOs, from teachers to doctors. His higher education and refined understanding of the law never interfered with his love for his South Side roots. He was as at ease with blue-collar friends and clients as he was fighting corporate America. He was comfortable around almost everyone. As a result, he was especially effective with jurors and handling witnesses.

In terms of witnesses, his razor-like wit made him a legendary cross-examiner. A self-proclaimed wordsmith, he was never at a loss for words or the perfect phrase to prove a point. His effective use of sarcasm scored with jurors. Many trial lawyers are afraid to use sarcasm in front of a jury — or to be themselves for that matter. For John, sarcasm was second nature. His unique style is difficult to emulate. It reminds me that the best lawyers are always the ones who are comfortable in their own skin.

John was a true warrior; the guy you want in your foxhole when in battle. He was also the "go to" guy if you needed a laugh, advice or just an ear to bend.

My close relationship with John and Dena, his wife and my former assistant of 12 years, provided me the privilege of seeing John at his best — while holding court with family and friends. He was charismatic, a trait impossible to teach or learn. And while John was good for the practice of law, the practice of law was even better for John. It was while practicing that he met Dena, his true love.

In law, John found his true calling. Being a lawyer was not just a job for him; it was a vocation. His skills, talents and passion intersected in trial work. Anyone who has ever seen him try a case would instantly recognize his comfort in the well of the courtroom — his second home. He may have developed those skills at 26th and California, where he met many of his life-long friends, but I believe John was born an advocate.

Although an ambitious lawyer, he never — under any circumstance — would compromise his moral integrity to succeed. He was as well-liked as a partner in law as he was an opponent.

Sadly, John's death has reminded many that tomorrow is not a guarantee. We are given no choice but to live in the present. Do we really want to measure success as "wins" in the courtroom, making tons of money or acquiring material possessions?

At the end of the Christmas classic, "It's a Wonderful Life," the angel Clarence left George his copy of "The Adventures of Tom Sawyer" in which he inscribed: "Remember, no man is a failure who has friends."

From the looks of his wake and funeral, where thousands of people waited in line to pay respects to my friend and his family, John Theodore Karnezis is the most successful person I have ever met. JT, you will be missed, but never forgotten.

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