

REMEMBRANCES—ROBERT E. SWEENEY

July 3, 2007
Patrick T. Jones

Fr. O'Donnell, Fr. Hritz, members of the clergy.

Kay, Bob, Dan, members of the Sweeney family, four generations strong.

Civic leaders, professional colleagues, friends of Bob Sweeney from every walk of life.

Today we mourn the loss, but celebrate the life of a leader, a giver, a trial lawyer, a public servant, a friend who at his core truly cared about people, a man who traveled in lofty circles but never lost the common touch.

I'm honored to briefly share a few facts and thoughts with you this morning about our mutual friend, a mentor to me for over forty years.

My path to Bob, like many of yours, was through his children. I went to Ignatius and Holy Cross with Bob and Dan, formed by the Jesuits as Bob had been a generation earlier.

Bob took me into his law firm as a clerk after college in 1973. That single act of kindness would alter the course of my professional life.

I look back across the years and know that I was not alone. No fewer than fifty young men and women were the recipients of this same gift.

And the gift was not just the job, or Bob's friendship, but that he mentored, he modeled the role of lawyer, public servant, and professional to so many of us.

Last year, in a column on mentoring directed to 50,000 Massachusetts lawyers, I wrote about Bob as a mentor, and what the experience had meant to me. I know that countless individuals here today will identify with these words:

My earliest model of a trial lawyer was Bob Sweeney from Cleveland. The father of thirteen children, many of whom were my high school and college classmates, Sweeney had served in Congress but by 1973 was a renowned trial lawyer representing unions and injured workers when I came looking for a clerk's job after college, not sure that law school was for me. In words and behavior he seemed to respond "Come along and see, you'll like it a lot." And I did.

Those eight months seem like a blur of activity to me now, but at their end. I was sure that I would be a trial lawyer.

During that period, I watched Sweeney, a small man with an outsized personality and more energy than anyone I'd ever met, try injury cases to million dollar verdicts, campaign and lose a close congressional primary, promote a host of public issues financially and politically in the community, bury a colleague and trial lawyer from the office who died unexpectedly, and begin what would be a leading asbestos practice. His days began before sunrise and often extended late into the evening. Coffee or lunch with him was an exciting collection of stories and instructions, punctuated by an occasional burst of temper but more often by a world class sense of humor. When necessary, we worked nights and weekends. I saw Sweeney in all sorts of roles in the community, and saw the respect he had earned reflected in the public's response to him.

In short, I saw that a trial lawyer had the opportunity to help change people's lives, could be a force for broader social change, had an obligation to public service, had fun, made a decent living, and gave back to his community. And while no one did that quite as well as Sweeney seemed to, this is the trial lawyer model that I'd like, at my best, to convey when I mentor.

Bob's friendship continued when I moved to Boston. He stayed in touch, and never to report a big win, or a huge fee or to tell a successful war story, although there were many for him to tell in those glory years of the '70's, '80's and '90's.

No, Bob was far more likely to call when you really needed him and his advice:

- when things weren't going that well for you;
- when your career was off the tracks;
- when your demons were up and running and you were battling alcohol, or substance abuse, or depression; or
- when some friend or family member was sick and needed help.

Those were the times that Bob would check in on you and on me, and that's when we could expect to receive a phone call, a letter, or a visit from our mutual friend, and would receive the benefit of his experience and advice.

Bob knew about the demons, you see. He had battled his own, and knew that people weren't perfect. And if he knew how to inspire, he also knew how to forgive.

Today you add your own memories and sentiments about Bob Sweeney with mine and others.

He taught us what it meant to be Irish, and proud of our ethnic heritage, and concerned about Ireland's future.

He showed generations of lawyers how to manage time. Bob Sweeney got more out of a minute, an hour, a day than anyone I've ever met. The clock seemed to slow down for him.

He made us laugh and feel good about ourselves, taught a generation of lawyers how to dress, and defined charm and charisma for me before I ever arrived in Boston.

Bob's legacy to us was his friendship, and the importance of friendship. He gave far more than he took, and he reminds us of that today.

And so Bob, you who valued time, and taught us not to waste words, and now must be urging a conclusion from heaven, rest in peace, our friend. May God re-arm you with your wit, your wisdom and your memory in heaven, as you greet family and friends gone before, and as you work on securing a place for us there as you did for so many of us here.

Your memory endures. We will never forget you