

Remembrance

Head of Former U.S. Attorneys helps pay tribute to late dean

By TOM KIRVAN
Legal News

As a cross examiner, he has been described as “polite but relentless.”

His courtroom style undoubtedly was influenced by the man who “changed my life,” Jim Robinson, the late U.S. Attorney in Detroit and the former dean of Wayne State University Law School.

Rich Rossman, who for the past three years has served as Executive Director of the National Association of Former United States Attorneys and was its president in 2009-10, was Robinson’s right hand man for several years in the late ‘70s when the two spearheaded prosecutions at the U.S. Attorney’s Office for the Eastern District of Michigan. The two would be reunited from 1998-2000 in Washington, D.C. when Rossman was the Chief of Staff to the Assistant Attorney General.

“Quite frankly, my career could have taken an altogether different trajectory if Jim Robinson hadn’t recruited me to be his chief assistant,” Rossman said of the man who will be posthumously honored at a scholarship reception Friday, Sept. 26 in Detroit. “Jim had a profound influence on me and how I approached the law, and I, like many others who knew him, owe him a tremendous debt of gratitude.”

Rossman is among the organizers of the James K. Robinson Scholarship Event, which will take place from 5:30-8:30 p.m. on September 26 at the London Chop House in Detroit. Last year’s event helped raise nearly \$13,000 for the endowed scholarship fund that the late Wayne Law dean and his wife, Marti, created to help students at the law school. Robinson, a 1968 graduate of Wayne Law, served as its seventh dean. He died of cancer in 2010 at age 66.

A University of Michigan grad, who earned his law degree from U-M in 1964, Rossman spent four years of his early legal career in a three-man practice in Royal Oak, eventually taking his trial skills to the Oakland County Prosecutor’s Office and the Federal Defender’s Office in Detroit. It was with the F.D.O. where Rossman likely caught the eye of Robinson, who from 1977-80 headed the U.S. Attorney’s Office in Detroit.

While serving as Robinson’s chief assistant during the three-year period, Rossman was the “lead counsel in the investigation, trial and conviction of Robert Leonard, then the prosecuting attorney for Genesee County, for several counts of public corruption.”

The highly publicized trial would help define Rossman’s career as a prosecutor, serving as a triumphant highlight after the brash and feisty Leonard was convicted of embezzling public funds meant for undercover operations. He was sentenced to 5 years in federal prison, while also being found guilty of contempt of court in seeking to conceal evidence of his wrongdoing, according to Rossman.

“It was a breach of trust that ruined a career of a longtime and respected county prosecutor,” Rossman said, noting that Leonard was suspected of stealing upward of \$600,000 over the course of his reign. “In many respects, it was a public tragedy that was played out in the courtroom.”



Photo by Robert Chase

A Detroit native, Rich Rossman has been a prosecutor and a defense counsel during his 50-year legal career. Rossman will be among the 50-year honorees at the State Bar Annual Meeting September 17-19 in Grand Rapids. On September 13, Rossman will attend his 50-year class reunion at U-M Law School.



Photo by Russ Marshall

In this photo from the archives of The Legal Advertiser, Rossman (second from right) shares a laugh with his wife Patty and former U.S. Attorney Jim Robinson (far left) and then U.S. Attorney Leonard Gilman. The get-together took place in 1981 when Rossman returned to private practice after serving as U.S. Attorney in Detroit.

Leonard’s mother proved to be an unwitting accomplice to his crimes, being called as a defense witness to offer an alibi for his transgressions.

“It was absolutely horrendous that he put his mother in a situation like that, but

as the prosecutor I had a duty to cross examine her and to poke holes in their story,” Rossman said. “It was during that cross examination, that a reporter from The Detroit News described my style as ‘polite but relentless.’”

Rossman, who was the first person in his family to attend college, received a Special Commendation for Outstanding Service from the U.S. Department of Justice in 1980. His father, Kenneth, was an Army veteran who worked at a variety of jobs – milkman, stockbroker, insurance agent, accountant, and assemblyman at the Detroit Packard Plant.

“My Dad never made more than \$8,000 a year, so college would not have been an option for me unless I worked and received scholarship help,” Rossman said. “It was an absolute necessity that I worked through college and law school to help pay the bills.”

Born in 1939, Rossman is the youngest of four children and graduated from Detroit Western High School. Two of his brothers, Kenneth Jr. and Gene, served during World War II, while his lone surviving sibling, Barbara, now resides in Florida.

He and his wife, Patty, who is a retired school librarian, will celebrate their golden wedding anniversary next January.

“Her folks and my parents were neighbors in Ferndale, so that’s how I got to know Patty,” Rossman said. “She has always been a very special woman.”

The couple has two children, Jeff, a litigator with a major law firm in Chicago, and Lisa, a Michigan State alum who works as a recruiter in the information technology field. The Rossmans also have four grandchildren.

Rossman spent 18 years as a partner with Pepper Hamilton during two tours of duty, serving as a senior litigation specialist from 1986-98. He represented the City of Detroit as its Special Corporation Counsel in the federal investigation on police corruption from 1989-94. He was the firm’s managing attorney from 2000-05, concentrating his practice in the fields of complex civil litigation and white-collar criminal defense work.

He earned a reputation for “putting things together and getting things done,” qualities that helped him become Executive Director of the National Association of Former United States Attorneys in 2011. It is a distinguished group that will hold its Annual Conference October 9-12 in Boston, where former FBI Director Robert Mueller will be honored. Pulitzer Prize winning reporter Charlie Savage of The New York Times will be among the featured speakers, according to Rossman. Last year’s keynote address was delivered by NBC News legal correspondent Pete Williams.

“It’s an organization that was founded in 1979 and former U.S. Attorney Ralph Guy, now a judge on the U.S. Court of Appeals, was among those who spearheaded its formation,” Rossman related. “Jim Robinson was among its early presidents.”

Rossman’s legal mentor is never far from his thoughts, which makes the upcoming scholarship reception all the more important.

“This is the fourth year that we have held the reception and we are working on building the endowment to the point where it can fully fund a law school scholarship each year,” Rossman said. “It is our way to remember Jim and to continue his service on behalf of others.”