

## Closing Argument > column



By Jeffrey E. Stone  
McDermott Will & Emery

### The importance of giants

**W**ithin the past few months, the Chicago legal community witnessed the passing of two legal giants: Jerry Solovy of Jenner & Block and George Cotsirilios of Cotsirilios, Tighe & Streicker. Although the media wrote extensive obituaries about both men, it seems fitting not only to reflect on their lives, but to think more specifically about what lawyers like them mean to younger lawyers. I consider myself one of the lucky ones who knew both men; their passings prompted me to think about what mentorship means in the law.

My first encounter with Jerry Solovy occurred about 30 years ago. I was working as a summer clerk at Jenner & Block between my first and second years of law school. Jerry was already a legend in the legal world — he was known for his prodigious work ethic, dedication to pro bono, commitment to the legal and philanthropic community and dedication to his clients. At that time, Bert Jenner was still alive and, as the surviving named partner, was the titular leader of the firm. But in reality, there was no doubt as to Jerry's role as the animating spirit of the firm. He pushed and prodded everyone in his firm, even the summer clerks, to be better and to think about giving back to the community.

Although I never worked for Jerry again after that first summer, I had cases against him in the years that followed. And I followed his legal achievements with awe. He continued to represent major corporations and institutions in the most complicated financial and commercial litigation without ever lessening his commitment to pro bono and community service. He represented every client, paying and pro bono alike with boundless enthusiasm and skill.

As the years passed, for reasons I never quite

understood but always deeply appreciated, Jerry took a personal interest in me and my career. He served as a mentor and coach to me, frequently calling me to urge that I take on a new role with some pro bono organization or philanthropic institution. He seemed to take great pleasure in taking me out to lunch, with the apparent single-minded purpose of reminding me how much more I could and should be doing to make more of a difference in our community.

George Cotsirilios served as a different kind of role model for me. My first direct encounter with George came about six years or so after I graduated from law school. I was an assistant U.S. attorney in Chicago, working on financial fraud and public corruption cases. I had a case where, after a long investigation, the FBI arrested a number of individuals, several of whom were business people involved in the Chicago banking community. One of the defendants was represented by George and, we believed, was the key to obtaining incriminating evidence on a more senior individual in the scheme.

Unfortunately for George, his client's arrest occurred at about 8 p.m. on a night George and his wife were hosting a black-tie dinner party at their home. We reached George at home at about 9 p.m., and for reasons that probably had relatively little to do with true time sensitivity (and more to do with our own inflated sense of self-importance), insisted that George troop down to the U.S. attorney's office and confer with his client about whether his client would cooperate with our investigation.

George showed up at our offices at around 10 p.m., impeccably tailored in black tie with not a hair out of place. He politely listened to our recitation of the evidence we compiled and then conferred alone with his client.

Following that conference, respectfully and with great dignity, he told us that he would not be coerced into making a rash or hasty decision and returned to host his dinner party.

It would be no understatement to say that George put us in our place. But he did so with grace and quiet professionalism. To his enduring credit, in the years that followed, George never again alluded to my efforts to push for a hasty (and what would have been an unfair) rush to a decision.

I write not just to extol these two fine men. Rather, in this area of constrained budgets, law firm cutbacks and seemingly constant challenges to our profession, I write to make a simple point: We should never forget the importance of giants.

Both men stood for excellence, substantively and in terms of dedication to their clients. Both were devoted to pro bono. Both were gentlemen, whose word was their bond, who treated opponents with more respect than they actually earned and who raised the standards for all who came into contact with them. Today, we talk about values and noble aspirations. But in truth, it is up to all of us to identify those giants among us worthy of emulation and who serve as role models.

Jerry never knew the impact he had on me when I was a law student, just as George never knew how he affected me as a prosecutor. Neither sought the mantle of "giant" and neither would have applied that label to himself. Jerry and George were true giants; those who knew them were lucky. But giants are not born, they are made. True giants cast long-lasting shadows that survive well after the giant has passed. We should all aspire to honor the legacies of these giants by casting similarly noble shadows for those who will follow us. ■

[jstone@mwe.com](mailto:jstone@mwe.com)