

Lunch with Legends: Trailblazers, Trendsetters and Treasures of the Rhode Island Bar



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Ray LaFazia came of age during the Great Depression. After graduating from Mount Pleasant High School in Providence in 1941, he served four years in the Army Air Corps during World War II.

Following the war, Mr. LaFazia returned to Rhode Island, and attended Rhode Island State College (later renamed University of Rhode Island) for two years before heading to Boston University to obtain his law degree.

Mr. LaFazia clerked for the Legal Aid Society of Rhode Island, and continued handling cases for Legal Aid even

after starting his own private practice. Early in his career, he locked horns with Bill Gunning in a workers' compensation case, and the two eventually established Gunning & LaFazia.

At Gunning & LaFazia, Mr. LaFazia earned a reputation as one of Rhode Island's best trial lawyers and, perhaps equally important, as one of the bar's most influential mentors. Under Mr. LaFazia's stewardship, Gunning & LaFazia produced numerous preeminent lawyers and judges, male and female alike. In fact, at one point in the early 1980s, when other firms had one token female, Gunning & LaFazia employed a, then shocking, 25 percent ratio of female attorneys. His daughter, The Honorable Jeanne E. LaFazia, Chief Judge of the District Court, noted, "For my father, it was always a matter of fairness and open-mindedness, and it was a big door that he opened."

We recently sat down with Mr. LaFazia to learn about the plethora of successes in his distinguished career. As a measure of his powerful impact in the Rhode Island bar, Chief Judge LaFazia, Workers' Compensation Court Chief Judge George E. Healy, Jr., and Superior Court Justice Netti C. Vogel – just a small sampling of his many distinguished mentees – also participated in the conversation.

Below are excerpts from our interview.

Why has mentoring been such an important part of your practice? Well, because I learned from it too, and it makes the practice of law enjoyable to share something. If you've got something you could share and receive from a fellow lawyer...it's like belonging to the same club; you understand each other better.



Raymond A. LaFazia, Esq.

What advice would you give to newer members of the bar?

Be trustworthy. I think that's the biggest thing. Because in recent years I've seen untrustworthiness, that some of your opponents will win at any price. And that's always happened, but I think it's more frequent in recent years.

What do you think has been the single biggest change in the legal profession and the practice of law since you first started back in the '50's? There are a couple of things. When I started practicing law we had eleven judges in the Superior Court and they handled all the calendars. Domestic relations, workers' compensation, everything was in the Superior Court.

[Another] big thing [was] when they changed the Rules of Civil Procedure. We had very simple rules. You could ask some interrogatories, but depositions were not widespread like they are today...and you kind of tried cases by the seat of your pants...you didn't get the discovery that you get today. On the other hand, that's become very expensive. So today to have a lawsuit is a big expense.

What is one of your most memorable legal experiences?

[S]ometime in the '60s, I got involved in politics and we went up against the endorsed candidates in the Town of Johnston. And we were pretty successful in our efforts to get our candidates known and so forth. But, when it came toward election time, we had voting machines and the endorsed candidates were all listed vertically and our candidates were listed across. And somehow I found out that as you go across, for older people particularly, the levers get harder and harder to push, and when you get out to that sixth lever or seventh lever, some people can't do it. And I don't know how I got in touch with them but I got in touch with the manufacturer of the voting machine, and he agreed. And we brought it to trial before Judge Perkins, and he explained that everybody should be listed vertically. We won that case. And we had them all listed vertically.

Would you do this all again? I can't think of anything better to do.

A great lawyer indeed, but also, as Judge Healy and Judge Vogel remark, "From our standpoint, [Ray] never stopped being a teacher."