

New Jersey Crime Victims' Law Center and Pompelio, Foreman & Gray, L.L.C.: An Holistic Approach to Law to Help Serve Crime Victims

By Jennifer Jean Miller

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WHIPPANY, NJ - "They were once nameless and faceless and he gave them their voice," said Assemblywoman Linda Greenstein (D – Plainsboro Township) of the 14th Legislative District. She is describing Richard Pompelio, Executive Director of the New Jersey Crime Victims' Law Center, the first pro-bono law center in New Jersey and nationwide. It has become a model for other centers across the country and has been studied by legal and judicial groups worldwide from as far away as China.

The Law Center provides direct representation for crime victims in the legal system and Amicus Curiae ("friend of the court") support nationwide. Additionally, the Law Center is a resource center for training and information for attorneys and legislators in the arena of victims' rights and victims' compensation.

A trail of tears began Pompelio's journey when his son Tony was murdered in 1989. At the time, Pompelio was a defense attorney and said he knew little about victims' rights. He soon realized the injustices facing the victims of crime and survivors left behind to pick up the pieces following a violent crime.

Greenstein, an Honorary Trustee of the Law Center, recognized the apathy with which crime victims were treated when working at the Philadelphia District Attorney's office. As an Assistant District Attorney,

Greenstein spent considerable time speaking with victims about their cases. A co-worker noticed Greenstein's dedication and late nights and remarked how, "victims are nothing but pawns in the game." It was then that Greenstein realized she was working for the wrong side. "It is always the State versus the Defendant," Greenstein said. "Rich (Pompelio) gave victims a role, which got into the Constitution. They are now treated with fairness, compassion and respect."

Pompelio left the law firm he was working at in 1992, establishing the New Jersey Crime Victims' Law Center in April of that year. Because the cases did not generate the revenues that others did, his partners did not want to focus on advocating for victims, which had become Pompelio's new path.

Assemblyman Alex DeCroce (R – Morris Plains), Republican Leader of the New Jersey State Assembly since 1993, knew Pompelio before Tony's murder. He created The Victims' Rights Constitutional Amendment in 1991, which provides rights for crime victims such as being informed of the criminal justice process, the ability to make a statement in court prior to sentencing, and to bring a photograph of the victim for display at sentencing in homicide cases. The amendment, which was enacted by voters, also provides for the emotional needs of crime victims, mandating that they be treated with compassion and without intimidation, as well as informed of financial and social service remedies, and given medical assistance if necessary.

DeCroce, another Honorary Trustee of the Law Center, has been instrumental in writing other legislation in support of the movement. DeCroce and Greenstein were primary sponsors who introduced enhancements to the original constitutional amendments in 2008, which included the survivor's ability to wear photo buttons of the victim, or to show a video presentation at sentencing.

The Tony Pompelio Commemorative Scholarship Fund was sponsored by DeCroce in 2000. The fund provides higher education financial assistance for children of crime victims. "I don't know many people who have dedicated their lives to help people as Rich has," DeCroce said. "In turn, I have gone out of my way to help him."

The work and long hours became overwhelming for Pompelio. He expressed to his wife, Ann, how he wished she was a lawyer, when she was helping him

out as much as possible in the Law Center while raising children Nicholas, Stevyn, Katherine and Connor. She entered Seton Hall in 1994, graduated in 1997, and began working with Pompelio in the Law Center in Sparta after graduation. Ann is now in private practice but acts as a satellite office for the firm, Pompelio, Foreman & Gray, L.L.C.

As a non-profit center being funded by federal and state grants and fundraising, Pompelio realized a more stable subsidizing method was necessary in order to perpetuate the Law Center.

He also expected he would work at the Law Center alone. However, in walked David E. Gray and Paul S. Foreman in 2008 with a plan. Gray had met Pompelio through a victims' rights volunteer program at Seton Hall Law School. Originally envisioning a Wall Street-gearred law career, Gray exceeded the minimum participation time in the volunteer program of 35 hours and actually worked more than 3,500 hours in the program over an 8 year period. Although Gray ended up working in other fields of law, the spark was ignited to work in the field of victims' rights. He and Foreman, who met when both were working as paralegals, agreed to start Pompelio, Foreman & Gray, to help financially support the Law Center.

Pompelio, who estimates each of them works approximately 80 hours weekly, is impressed by his partners. "They work their tails off to support the practice," he said. Gray has been practicing law for seven years and Foreman for three. Pompelio equates their experience each to twenty-five years.

Pompelio said the firm has never been busier and has grown to the point in one year in which they have needed to move to a bigger office in their building in Whippany. In the fall, Pompelio's son, Nicholas, will be joining the Law Center as the newest partner. Satellite offices have also opened in Hoboken and Brigantine, which cover all aspects of law and serve all types of clients.

Whatever type of client is represented, however, each client learns of the focus of the Law Center. The partners believe by sharing about the Law Center with their non-victim clients, they may possibly reach a crime victim since most individuals may know someone who has been a victim of a crime who may be seeking representation. If there is a companion civil aspect to a victim's case, the firm can represent the client on a contingency basis on the

civil portion.

Most clients represented by the firm are victims, including those who have suffered at the hands of perpetrators from crimes of sexual assault and domestic violence. "The nature of the work we do is remarkably sad," said Foreman. "We have to keep a positive attitude. Our goal is to help the families get through their traumas."

"We are 180 degrees different than other firms," Pompelio said. Those who know Pompelio and his partners say they are on call 24/7. Oftentimes, the three of them are awake in the middle of the night emailing one another about their cases. They are each aware of the details of every single case represented by the firm and the Law Center. "We have a different outlook than other firms in how we represent clients," said Pompelio, who has seen Gray and Foreman drive clients to physical therapy appointments and help them coordinate and pay for babysitting.

Laughter, high fives and hugs between the partners are common and they describe one another as each others' best friends. Pompelio said Foreman and Gray are like sons. "After two weeks, it felt like we've known each other for years," added Pompelio. "We don't underestimate how lucky we are," said Gray. The positivity and warmth is carried throughout the entire office. "Everyone connected to this office is remarkable," Pompelio said.

Victims who once walked in with feelings of desperation are comforted by what the partners describe as an "Holistic Approach to Law", which supports the individual needs of each client.

The firm is currently representing the family of Jennifer Parks, the teenager killed by two brothers in her basement in 2005. The younger brother, James Zarate, 18, is currently on trial. The partners are working together to walk the Parks family through their difficult journey as they endure the second trial in the murder of their only child.

Their unique approach in caring for victims has brought state and national recognition to the firm and Law Center. This year, Pompelio received the American Bar Association National Criminal Justice Frank Carrington Crime Victim Attorney Award for his advocacy over the past 20 years for crime victims. The expression of gratitude from the crime victims and their families can also be seen in the cards of appreciation sent to the partners on various

occasions throughout the year and handmade gifts such as a patchwork pillow created by one person, with each patch representing a different victim.

"Our philosophy is nobody ever leaves here without feeling better," said Pompelio.

For more information about the New Jersey Crime Victims' Law Center and Pompelio, Foreman & Gray, LLC, see their websites: <http://www.njcvlc.org/> and <http://www.pfglawyers.com/>

Photo above: *From left to right, David E. Gray, Richard D. Pompelio and Paul S. Foreman stand in the entryway of the law firm and Law Center headquarters office.*

Photo by Jennifer Jean Miller



http://thealternativepress.com/images2/crime2_ts2.jpg

Foreman and Gray flank the cover of Pompelio's upcoming book, Crime Victims' Rights, A

Guide for Practitioners and Service Providers in the State of New Jersey.

Photo by Jennifer Jean Miller



http://thealternativepress.com/images2/crime2_ts2.jpg

"Victim Rights Matter" is expressed in this handmade patchwork pillow created by a Law Center Client in appreciation of the work they have done for victims. Each patch represents a different victim.

Photo by Jennifer Jean Miller



Awareness bands emblazoned with "New Jersey Crime Victims' Law Center – Crime Victims' Rights" greet each person who enters the office, along with pamphlets about the Law Center's services. The bands are in Tony Pompelio's favorite blue color reminiscent of one of the Sparta High School's colors where he was a student.