

A VIEW OF RUTGERS LAW FROM THE BENCH AND BEYOND

*The Honorable William Martini**

Congratulations to Rutgers School of Law–Newark on its one hundred year anniversary! Such a milestone in the life of any institution is an appropriate time for reflection and celebration.

My own personal milestone, practicing law for over thirty-five years, is cause for reflection as well, particularly as to those influences and professional turning points that helped define my legal career. In doing so, I must acknowledge the positive influence that Rutgers School of Law–Newark has had on my career—not simply in its primary missions of providing a top notch legal education and preparing me to practice law and become a professional—but more importantly, for its significant influence in both my personal and professional life.

I attended Rutgers School of Law–Newark from 1969-1972, a time of unusual unrest often characterized at best as a period of societal turmoil, or at worst, that of anarchy. No societal mores or institutions went unchallenged. No tradition, custom, or even law went unquestioned. It was in the eye of this storm that as law students at Rutgers, we engaged in debates and discourse, often heated, contentious, and way beyond the narrow constraints of our case studies. Much to my consternation and confusion, and perhaps with considerable naiveté on my part, I recall one of my first year professors proudly announcing in class that “if you came to Rutgers to learn black letter law and memorize statutes, you came to the wrong place.” He explained, now to my better understanding, that the law evolves and progresses over time, and that as students, we were there to learn how to analyze and solve problems through the law. Novel at the time, I have of course come to understand that this method was not very different than the approach of any other top tier law school, then or now.

What distinguished the Rutgers School of Law–Newark experience, however, was that the law was not to be studied in the abstract or solely for self-sustenance. Rather, the law was to be considered in an environment and culture devoted to impressing upon its students that it was available for a higher purpose, most particularly, to serve others. Rutgers emphasized applying our legal

* Judge, United States District Court, District of New Jersey (2002-Present); J.D., Rutgers School of Law–Newark, 1972.

studies and learning to the real world in a spirit that would positively impact society through the law. But what most distinguished the Rutgers School of Law–Newark experience for me was the sensitivity, concern, and compassion with which this spirit was fostered, which emphasized the less fortunate among us, the “voiceless.” In my opinion, this is a tradition that should make all of us in the Rutgers community most proud.

These teachings have remained with me throughout my professional career. I like to think they served me well, particularly during those periods of public service as an assistant in the Hudson County Prosecutor’s Office, Assistant United States Attorney for the District of New Jersey, Congressman for the Eighth District of New Jersey, and even as Commissioner of The Port Authority of New York and New Jersey. I know they have also greatly aided and guided me in fulfilling my current judicial duties and responsibilities as a judge for the United States District Court for the District of New Jersey, and for that I am deeply appreciative.

Rutgers School of Law–Newark has been an integral part of the Martini family for over eighty years. My uncle, Nicholas Martini—a talented lawyer, extraordinary public servant, and a personal mentor of mine—graduated from the Law School in 1926. And this year, our family is looking forward with great pride to the graduation of our daughter, Marissa Martini, with the class of 2009. With each generation of our family that graduates from Rutgers School of Law–Newark, I realize just what an extraordinary institution it has become and how proud I am to say that I am a part of it. While there have been many changes over the years—new campuses, buildings, curriculums, and professors—fortunately, one thing has remained the same: a tradition of strong legal studies dedicated to the service of others with empathy, understanding, and yes, passion. For that, all Rutgers School of Law–Newark students, alumni, faculty, staff, and its general community should be indebted and grateful.

Congratulations again, and best of luck with another one hundred years of legal excellence and success!