

Everything in Between



Rocco I. Debitetto

Chair | CBA Young Lawyers Section

Rocco is an associate with Hahn Loeser + Parks LLP, where he focuses his practice in the creditors' rights, reorganization and bankruptcy area. He can be reached at (216) 274-2374 or rdebitetto@hahnlaw.com

Interstate lane marks passed quickly beneath the car. *Are those really ten-feet long?* I wondered. It was the first of many random thoughts I'd have on this ride. I raised my stare to witness the heart of Ohio passing outside. Artfully weathered farmhouses, winter fields, ponds and wildlife passing the day watching smoke curl from chimneys. Wonderful subtleties that, despite many trips down this road, I'd somehow never noticed. I never considered why.

The defroster kicked on, causing a memorial card resting on the dash to tumble down the console. It reminded me of the purpose of the trip.

My wife and I were returning to Cleveland, after helping lay to rest a second uncle that I lost in as many months. Cancer killed both men.

I could recharacterize their deaths by saying something like: "They left us after losing courageously-fought battles with cancer." But I won't. It suggests disease can become the benchmark against which life is measured. It suggests going out on a losing note—anything but true for my uncles, let alone anybody who's endured physical or mental illness.

I've always been a fan of finding the silver lining, which can be next to impossible when the cloud you're searching is Death's vaporous breath. As my wife toggled through radio stations searching for a song, I searched for the upside of down in the events of days past. My thoughts settled on my uncles' wakes.

As is common at many wakes, friends and family were offered an opportunity to speak of each man. Among shots of Jameson at one, and to the tune of Sinatra at another, I listened as words breathed life into memories. Any attempt to describe fully what was said would be futile. I have neither the space nor the talent. But as any lawyer knows, many times what isn't said can be far more significant than what is. That was the case here.

Both men enjoyed successful careers. Nobody doubted that. Mentions of career pursuits, however, were virtually silent compared to the epicenter of praise for their devotion to others as husbands, fathers, grandfathers, brothers, uncles, mentors and friends. When the ashes begat ashes and the dust begat dust *these* pursuits defined each man's legacy. Any doubt as to this conclusion was quelled by one look around rooms overflowing with beneficiaries of their devotion—beneficiaries living with similar ardor, a trait undoubtedly learned through example. Living proof that true riches are devised without last will or testament.

An unannounced bump in the road jolted me back into the now. I focused again on the scenery outside. Then my stomach bottomed out.

I found my silver lining.

My uncles wanted to teach me a final lesson before going about their ways. It wasn't easy to face. Much like the passing landscape I'd been ignoring for so many years, I'd also been ignoring what will matter most after I take my walk on the wild side—the very pursuits ensuring that my uncles' spirits resonate in every generation hereafter. I won't detail my countless failures in this regard. Sadly, I fear many of you need nothing more to understand them.

My wife finally settled on a station. The voice on the radio sang: "*The first and last breaths don't matter. It's all the ones in between.*"

I chuckled quietly to myself. My wife noticed the peculiar look on my face. "What are you thinking about?" she queried.

"About how true that is."

"How true what is?"

My Blackberry vibrated, jabbing me in the side and commanding full attention for the incoming messages. I shut it off and smiled at a stocking-capped kid waiving from the back seat of a passing car.

"Nothing."

In memory of Rudolph J. Buoni and Joseph B. Downey, two men who left us after succeeding in the challenge of life. ☞