Dad's eulogy December 14, 2011

Good morning everyone one. It is my privilege to represent the Albany Law School alumni who worked on the student maintenance crew for our departed boss and friend John DeMatteo. We, along with assorted others, are proudly known as the Albany Law School DeMatteo scholars.

John DeMatteo loyally served the Albany Law School community for 34 years. He was strong, durable and discreet. If there was someone in the law school community that didn’t like him and respect him, I don’t know who it was. He defined his role for us very well; he always said, “I’m your dear old Dad.”

The law school needed cleaning, every day, night and day. There was no big maintenance staff, so a part-time cleaning crew was required and some selection criteria were needed. To help fill that gap, there was an astonishingly brilliant, prominent professor and Chairman of the Admissions Committee named Professor William Watkins. Professor Watkins, who referred to himself as “the Wat”, started the Albany Law School rugby club in 1966, 3 years after Dad started working at the school. Dad was a confidant of the Wat and he helped the Wat on many, many occasions. Before the advent of computers, together, Dad and the Wat knew
everything about everybody. And so (to use a phrase Dad enjoyed) BINGO, the DeMatteo scholarship program was born.

The DeMatteo scholarship program largely consisted of rugby players and selected others. There was no advertising for these jobs and there was no formal application process. Suffice to say, you didn’t have a job unless you cut the mustard with the Wat and with Dad.

Student workers were required to come in at 6 times a week, either at 7 am or 11 pm to “work” for an hour. Dad wanted the school clean and Dad wanted the work done. He would show up at these odd hours, without notice, and pop in. Literally, you’d turn the corner and there he was. If you weren’t where you supposed to be, you got some extra duty.

Dad was sometimes quick to commentate on the quality and quantity of your work. I think he yelled more at the guys he liked, like Homer, for whom Dad had several nicknames. That’s why I think Dad liked me because he yelled at me a lot as a freshman. For instance, as I was mopping the floor, Dad would pop in with an instant critique, something along these lines: “Where did you learn to mop floors? Were you in the Navy? This floor looks like a battleship! You’re no good, you’re a terrible worker. I made a mistake hiring you, I think I’m going to fire you.”
I got fired at least 5 times in my first year; it took me about 3 times to figure out that Dad wasn’t serious.

Dad was a loyal friend and helper to Miss Helen Wilkinson and Mrs. Carpinello. He liked them and they liked him. He would do anything for them. Together with the Wat, they ran the place; they were an extremely strong, loyal team. Dad would also do hundreds of favors for the faculty during his time there; anything as simple as getting supplies to taking faculty members to the airport or helping them when their cars broke down. He was always helping someone at the school and he was extremely discreet. The man kept a lot of secrets. I don’t know what they paid Dad at the school, but it wasn’t enough.

Dad loved a little game involving dollar bills called “liar’s poker” and he loved sitting in the cafeteria with some of the guys, making some noise, carrying on, playing liar’s poker. To be politically correct here today, I’ll say only Dad was “very competitive.” Dad loved drinking coffee, drinking soda from the soda machine and sitting in the cafeteria with his boys on breaks. Many times John’s assistant Richard Van Hattum would join him. It was almost like the comedy team Lewis and Martin. Dad was the straight man and Richard was the comedian.
Make no doubt, Dad was entitled to work breaks and everyone knew it, everyone from the lowliest freshman all the way up to the Dean. When John DeMatteo was sitting down, you respected his time because he was always working, always on the job. The guys on the crew loved drinking coffee and soda with John. I think grape soda was his favorite and I think it cost a quarter from the cafeteria machine. Sometimes you had to play liar’s poker to determine who bought the soda. It was a lot of fun to play liars poker, drink grape soda and hang with Dad in the cafeteria.

Dad always liked to know your social status, how you were doing with the opposite sex. He had a network of unknown information sources; he had connections and snitches. I almost think it’s possible that some of his snitches traded information so they didn’t have to work so hard at their jobs. He was like J. Edgar Hoover. Somehow Dad always seemed to know what was going on. It was the 1970’s law school version of social networking, sort of like “cafeteria FACEBOOK.”

Dad commanded respect among the crew. You could laugh with him, you could joke around, you could always pretend you were working too hard and needed more pay. We had a lot of fun doing that. We were like puppies; barking, yipping, often yawning and sleeping; Dad took it all in
stride. But, whenever Dad needed you didn’t ask questions. When Dad said “I need you” you followed him, no questions asked.

John DeMatteo entered the US Army at a young age. He stayed in the service for 7 years. He was shipped to Korea around 1950. He had the extreme misfortune of being pinned down in the Korean War with the group of soldiers that later became known to the world as the Frozen Chosin or “The Chosin Few.”

For his service as one of The Frozen Chosin, Dad was decorated with the Bronze Star, not once, not twice but three times.

Years after, Dad’s elder son Evan graduated from Siena College and received his officer’s commission in the United States Army.

Evan received orders to report to Korea, where his father had so valiantly fought 30 years earlier. Evan had obtained some old Polaroid pictures of various places in Korea. As he was getting ready to ship overseas, Evan asked his Dad about the places depicted in the photos.

Dad took him downstairs to their basement, brought out a Korean map, and showed Evan where each of the places depicted in the photos were located on the map. Evan said he received his first lesson on the Korean War including Puzan, the DMZ and the Chosin Reservoir.
Dad was always pretty close mouthed about his Bronze Stars. Both Evan and Bernie relate this story from Dad:

We were pinned down under heavy advancing enemy fire and we were getting surrounded. The Chinese were coming and the order came for direct fire. Our main gun was a 76 mm artillery gun that had broken and was not firing. We needed it to save ourselves but the gun had been abandoned and was being hit by enemy fire. The cord to retrieve the weapon was broken. I looked around and I saw the guys I was fighting with and I knew that many had wives and kids back home. I was single and I decided I was going for that gun. I ran out to the gun and kicked it, trying to get it to fire. I kicked it 5 times and it wouldn’t fire. Finally out of desperation I hit it with my fist and it came to life.

Dad suffered in the war. In addition to the misery of the Chosin Reservoir, Dad contracted malaria a couple times and was very sick. When he returned, he had PTSD, post-traumatic stress disorder, back before that was a term that everyone understood.

Evan tells of being home on first leave with Dad in Price Chopper. Dad was asking about the effectiveness of the Evan’s Brigade Commander.
Evan described the Commander defusing a difficult situation. Evan said his Dad remarked at the time “that was a guy with a touch.”

Later returning to Fort Hood, Evan found himself thinking about Dad’s comment about the “touch” of the Brigade Commander and Evan thought “You know, my Dad was the guy with the touch. Look at all those guys at the law school whose lives my dad touched.”

Dad’s son, John Jr. verifies all of this and more:

*Our dad was completely devoted to his family, as busy as he was with work, he never missed any family function that we had. As kids when were sick, once we started feeling better there was always a treat, usually it was pizza.*

*When I moved to Connecticut, my parents would come down to visit often, the two times that I moved into a new apartment, Dad always came down with my mother and just unpacked for me, no questions asked. In the last apartment that I lived in, my dad got along with my land-lady because they had two things in common, cards and bingo. Every time they visited, there was always a card game.*
So, while we were in law school, did we know any of this? No, we did not. But now it’s easy to see how Dad handled us so well. All of our hijinks, pranks, no-shows, excuses, stunts, gags and more than occasional stupidity were nothing for John DeMatteo to handle. He’d seen the worst and he’d survived the worst. Although we thought we were under so much stress and were having such a terrible, difficult time, Dad knew better and in his own way, he tried to show us the way; with camaraderie, humor, leadership and joy de vivre, the joy of life.

John and Bernie were married for decades, I’m not sure how many years but if I said 60 years I’d be in the ballpark. Dad was devoted to Bernie and Bernie was devoted to Dad, all those years of loyal love and devotion. For those of us that were lucky enough in school, we got to eat at Bernie’s kitchen table in her home on occasion. I ate there once in 3 years, Jim Hacker ate there several times; I think Homer Keyes probably would have preferred to live there.

Together, Bernie and her boys, Evan and John, kept Dad at home, right to the end. No nursing home, no institution, he did not turn into a ward of the state. A solid family that took care of their husband and Dad.
So, John DeMatteo was much more than he appeared at Albany Law School. He was a war hero, a soldier decorated for bravery and valor. He was a great husband and father; very loyal, protective and proud of his family. He was a one-of-a-kind icon at his workplace. He selflessly took care of thousands of people. He took care of us. He never sought the limelight, never wanted promotions. The Army wanted to promote him to Sergeant and he refused. All he wanted to do was live the American dream and help his sons to a better life.

He fought for the things he cherished and achieved; yet he was kind, gentle and caring. He’d give you the shirt off his back and a couple times I think he did just that. He never asked for anything in return. This man was the salt of the earth.

So in closing, we turn back to Dad, now with the spirit and with his God. And we say to him now in a way he would say to us then: “C’mon Dad, we’ll do the work. It’s our turn now; you’ve got a new group of friends for “liar’s poker” and you’ve got a new cafeteria to start your coffee business. So get on it!

We love you Dad. We love you.

Thank you.  

William W. Pulos  December 14, 2011