

Defending Criminals, Offering Comfort To Victims

Paying for funeral is not veteran attorney's first act of kindness

By DOUGLAS S. MALAN

John Frazier was returning to his family's Waterbury home on the night of Jan. 18 to eat birthday cake with his relatives. But the high school student who had just turned 17 didn't make it inside.

He was gunned down on the doorstep in a drive-by shooting. Not only did Frazier's life end tragically, but his family couldn't afford to pay for his funeral. Schoolmates at Kaynor Technical High School in Waterbury cobbled together about \$2,000 to help out, falling far short of the \$8,000 needed.

That's when Waterbury criminal defense attorney Martin J. Minnella heard about the family's plight and stepped in. He covered the \$8,000 and then rented out the American Legion hall in Watertown after the funeral to host a dinner for about 400 of Frazier's schoolmates and family members.

"It's a terrible thing that happened, but it has united a whole school," said Minnella, a Waterbury native who practices at Moynahan & Minnella. "Strangers have called and other lawyers have called to thank me for doing this."

Frazier's mother Nellie told the *Waterbury Republican-American*, "Marty is my angel God sent to me. I can't express how I feel about this."

Leonard M. Crone, a Waterbury criminal defense attorney, said it's not the first time that Minnella has responded to Waterbury residents in need. "It didn't surprise me at all," Crone said. The two lawyers have known each other for more than 20 years and were former law partners at Minnella's firm.

"He should be commended for stepping forward like that," Crone said.

Civic-Minded

Minnella, who has five college-age children of his own, is an active businessman and volunteer in the city. Aside from his law practice, he co-owns the City Hall Caf  in downtown Waterbury. He also sponsors local youth league baseball and football teams while volunteering at the Anderson Boys Club and the River Baldwin Recreation Center.

Last year, he received a humanitarian award from the boys club and also was honored for his restaurant's role in providing

holiday meals and gifts for underprivileged Latinos in town.

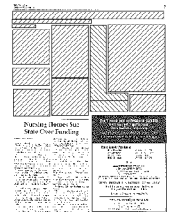
Picking up the cost of Frazier's funeral "is the first time he's gotten a lot of publicity, but he's done many other things for the community that have gone unreported and were under the radar," said Crone, who is the vice president of the Connecticut Criminal Defense Lawyers Association.

Minnella acknowledged that he has paid for the funerals of other people whose families he knows through his law practice. Minnella knew Frazier's family because he had represented the teen's stepfather in the past. He also knew the younger Frazier was a popular student at Kaynor Tech who played in the school band and wanted to be an electrician. "He was a good kid who had no enemies," Minnella said.

No one has been arrested in connection with the killing, and Minnella is offering a \$5,000 reward for information that leads to an arrest.

Minnella stepped forward to assist a family victimized by crime at the same time that he's defending three clients facing murder charges and three others facing attempted murder charges.

It's an irony that is not lost on Minnella, who has been a criminal defense attorney in his hometown for 35 years. He got into the practice because one of his first cases after he graduated from New England School of Law in Boston involved a client who had been involved in a bar fight.



“Everyone is entitled to a defense,” Minnella said. “Morally, no one is justified taking a person’s life. But I’m a lawyer and there are some legal defenses for some people.”

Defending criminals is one reason lawyers in general have a bad public image, Minnella acknowledged. He says that image is unwarranted. “[Lawyers] get a bad rap all the time, but I know more lawyers who have done good things than lawyers who have done bad things,” Minnella said.

“I can’t change the world, but I can try to affect my community.” ■

‘He’s done many other things for the community that have gone unreported and were under the radar,’ said attorney Leonard Crone.



Waterbury attorney Martin Minnella rented an American Legion hall and hosted a dinner for about 400 mourners after a teenager’s funeral.