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Roger Williams University School of Law

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September 10, 2019

Law School News

Remembering RWU Law's Founding Dean

Professor Anthony J. Santoro, who died yesterday, also served as the sixth president of Roger Williams University.



Professor Tony Santoro mugs for the camera at the dedication of an RWU Law classroom in his name in 2017. Image Credit: RWU Law/Andrea Hansen

September 10, 2019

Anthony J. Santoro, sixth president of Roger Williams University and the founding dean of RWU Law, died yesterday after a short illness. He was 77.

In the early 1990s, Santoro joined Roger Williams to help establish a law school that “would enhance the legal culture of Rhode Island.” Santoro had already been instrumental in establishing two other law schools, and as dean of Widener Law, he had engineered a major expansion from Delaware into Pennsylvania. A native of Melrose, Mass., a former resident of Fall River, and spouse of a native Rhode Islander, Santoro knew the local lay of the land well, and brought his expertise to bear on launching the state’s only law school.

When he was appointed as the law school's first dean in 1993, he almost single-handedly recruited the entire founding faculty. Just days before the law school's official opening, he turned the deanship over to a new leader and went on to become the president of Roger Williams University.

During his seven year as the dean, president and chancellor at RWU, Santoro laid the foundation upon which today's institution has been built. He created what is now the Feinstein School of Arts, Humanities, and Education, as well as the Mario J. Gabelli School of Business, named in honor of university trustee and the founder and chairman of Gabelli Asset Management Company. Santoro also re-established the university's Providence campus, now University College at One Empire St., enabling robust growth of the undergraduate population and international students.

"Tony Santoro led Roger Williams during a pivotal time of growth, establishing the law school and expanding our mission to reaching and serving the community in Providence," said RWU President Ioannis Miaoulis. "His leadership strengthened the reputation of the university and built the groundwork for us to become the university the world needs now."

"Put simply, nobody has done more for RWU Law than Tony Santoro. Nobody. And look at where his law school is today," said RWU Law Dean Michael J. Yelnosky. "Tony created this remarkable community. He had a vision, he had the talent, and he had the energy to make this happen."

Santoro earned his bachelor's degree from Boston College and a J.D. and LL.M. in Taxation from Georgetown University School of Law. He began his career in legal education in 1970 at the Marshall-Wythe School of Law, College of William and Mary, served as professor of law at Western New England College School of Law, and assumed his first deanship at the University of Bridgeport School of Law (now Quinnipiac) in 1976. During his tenure as dean at Widener University School of Law from 1983 to 1992, he opened Widener's Harrisburg campus.

Following his tenure as law dean and as university president, he returned to RWU Law as a member of the faculty, teaching until his retirement in 2018. During those 18 years, he was an engaged, beloved faculty member. Many of his students followed in his footsteps to earn LL.M. degrees in taxation, and a number of them endowed the Professor Anthony J. Santoro Business Law Lecture in 2012, bringing renowned academics and practicing lawyers to engage with students interested in business law. In 2017, the law school dedicated in his name the same classroom in which he taught hundreds of students federal income tax and business organizations.

Santoro was also valued as a mentor and colleague by the members of the RWU Law faculty and staff, who nominated him for professor emeritus status, granted in 2017 by the law school board of directors and university board of trustees.

The law school granted Tony Santoro an honorary degree in 2016, for his "inspired and foundational contributions to the law school and to the cause of law and justice in the State of Rhode Island as a whole."

Santoro is survived by his wife Pauline and his children, Lynne Sullivan and her husband, Greg, of Somerset; Anthony J. Santoro Jr. and his wife, Maura, of Bristol, R.I.; Lauren Gentile and her husband, Andrew, of Somerset; and Anne Erhard and her husband, Brian, of Canton; 10 grandchildren, Kathryn, Conor and Ian Sullivan; Sophia and Anna Santoro; Lily and Mia Gentile; and William, Teddy and Luke Erhard; a sister, Linda Reidy and her husband, Joseph, of Somerset; and several nieces and nephews.