Polidori leaves kind, funny legacy

HANNAH GARCIA | LAW WEEK COLORADO

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Steve Polidori/Courtesy Image

"BIG" is a word that can describe a lot about the late Steve Polidori at some point in his life: big personality, big mustache, big heart.

But a big ego would never appear on that list.

"Trial lawyers can tend to have strong opinions and very healthy egos," partner Bill Keating said. "Steve never had that."

Polidori's firm partners at Keating Wagner Polidori Free described a kind, sometimes irreverent and too often funny man who could not contain his goodwill, something illustrated by the volume of cards and notes sent to the office and the tears and laughs in eulogies at his memorial service on Sept. 17, from judges, clients, opposing counsel and trial lawyers.

Always Help the Underdog

Polidori, a Denver native, came to the firm in 1982 after spending five years as a deputy district attorney in Arapahoe County.

Wagner described the compassionate approach to defendants that Polidori had while in the district attorney's office. Bill Keating said Polidori was more interested in fairness than glory, always searching for a reason for leniency. Keating said they were struck by that kind of mercy.

"He was not this hard-edged young prosecutor who wanted to be sure he got all the notches possible on his prosecutorial belt," Bill Keating said.

Polidori "just had a capacity to understand human nature," partner Bob Wagner said. "Whatever blemishes, flaws or foibles a person had, he could just close his eyes to it."

Polidori had a framed photo on his wall from the 1984 fire at a historic downtown Masonic Temple. Despite a ruling that allowed testimony about a possible prior arson that never resulted in charges, Polidori was still proud of his defense work.

"It was a bad ruling, and there was no way to win the case," Wagner said. "But it was emblematic of Steve's desire to always help the underdog."

Polidori was diagnosed with lung cancer on March 28 but continued working. In June, a client sent Polidori a thank-you letter. The elderly woman's husband was killed by an SUV after pushing her out of the way while crossing the street.

"While nothing can erase the pain of my sudden loss…you have made it financially possible for me to fulfill some of the plans (we) had for the remaining years of my life," the woman wrote. "My daughters and I are eternally grateful to you…"

"The note is evidence of the late lawyer's dedication to his clients," Keating said. Polidori sent a note to his longtime paralegal, Leslie Ruiz, to check on a case, even while his children, son Louis and daughter Zoraide, sat by his side.

"In the last few weeks of his life, Steve was in a lot of pain, but he never complained about it," Bill Keating said. "When that case was done, Steve said, 'I guess I'm going out on a high note.'"

Funnier than hell

Polidori's skill and gregariousness expanded beyond courtroom borders. He was a talented musician, loved the Rolling Stones and The Beatles. The partners described Polidori as "a first-rate artist," accomplished at photography and drawing.

"Most people would just draw circles," Mike Keating said, describing watching Polidori doodle in the courtroom. "You would look over Polidori's shoulder and say, 'Oh my god, that's Venice.'"

Bill Meyer, the managing arbiter at the Judicial Arbiter Group, wrote an email to Polidori's friends: "When working with Steve, his competence and professionalism were always evident. But it was his humor I most enjoyed. Whether through his dry wit, recounting a bicycle adventure with you all or telling a joke, Steve made me laugh."

Meyer said when a case with Steve was scheduled, he always looked forward to the mediation because he "knew there would be laughter – even in the most serious of circumstances."

"I will think of Steve often," Meyer wrote. "Few have that joy of spirit to always make us laugh."

The hardest working lawyer

Bill Keating called Polidori "the hardest working lawyer," which is perhaps something he picked up working at his father's grocery store, Polidori's Grocery and Meat Market, in North Denver. The company is now Polidori Sausage, and its legacy can still be found in some of the best Italian restaurants in the city, according to childhood friend John Astuno.

As much as he loved the law, Astuno said he loved "all things Italian."

"As kids, we'd sit down in the gym with our sack lunches, and I'd have bologna or peanut butter and jelly," Astuno said. "Steve had this Italian bread, prosciutto, capicola, provolone cheese. I'd come home and be like, 'What the crap? I get peanut butter and jelly on Wonder Bread, and he gets that?'"

With a father, Louis, who never took a vacation, and a pride for his roots, it was easy to see why Polidori worked his way through law school, including waiting tables at Leo's Place.

"He never blindly accepted authority," Astuno said. "He had a wonderful ability to question, and that's probably what made him such a good lawyer."

Polidori was known for mentoring younger lawyers as well. Mike Keating, who knew Polidori since childhood, said he remembered Polidori's mop of hair and "big Italian mustache," the young lawyer said, "so, he looked like Chef Boyardee."

"I owe a great gratitude to Steve because he's the one who brought me here, sat me down over an Italian dinner and convinced me to leave being a DA and joining," Mike Keating said. "As a person, he's just a kick in the pants."

A wonderful sense of irreverence

Astuno, also an attorney, knew Polidori since the age of 5. When the pair was in the seventh grade, a student teacher fresh from college asked for honest feedback.

"Of course, being the goody-two-shoes kid, I said, 'Oh, good luck as an educator, I'm sure you'll enrich lives,' or some bull crap. And Steve said, 'You should go back to school, learn to teach and move to Texas.' And he got kicked out of school because they said it was too impertinent and he got suspended for two days. And he says, 'That's crap, they said I could say what I wanted, and I did!'"

"He had a wonderful sense of irreverence, but in a really nice way," Astuno said fondly. "Steve never changed a bit."

No woe is me

About a month after his diagnosis, friends celebrated his birthday on April 22 with a big party. From Utah and New York, Polidori's friends came from all over, Astuno said.

"Whereas if you had a party for me, you couldn't get people to come from Arvada," Astuno said.

"There really was no anger, no 'woe is me'," Bob Wagner said.

Astuno accompanied Polidori to a follow-up appointment hoping to hear good news, only to hear that the chemotherapy was ineffective. While Polidori stayed calm, Astuno was "in a state of disrepair, coming apart at the seams emotionally," Bill Keating said.

"The nurse comes in, looks at Steve, then looks at John and goes over to comfort him because she thinks John is the one who just got the terrible news about his own health," Bill Keating said, laughing heartily. "That's a good example of Steve's ability to just accept life."

Meyer summed up his, and perhaps many others' relationships with Polidori with an Oscar Wilde quote: "Laughter is not at all a bad beginning for a friendship, and it is far the best ending for one."