

Aug 1, 2017

Lawyer finds calling fundraising on behalf of Rhode Island Foundation

A quick word with . . . Jim Sanzi



As vice president of development for the Rhode Island Foundation, James S. Sanzi hasn't necessarily followed a traditional trajectory of a career in the law.

While the Massachusetts native spent several years as a military attorney with the U.S. Navy JAG and then worked as a litigator at Adler, Pollock & Sheehan, Sanzi is confident that he has found his calling in fundraising for the foundation that he characterizes as Rhode Island's "engine for philanthropy."

But Sanzi sees parallels between his legal training and the skills needed to effectively match donors with the causes they care about, all while bringing needed support to the

state's nonprofit sector.

"Every day you're working with the art of advocacy and the art of persuasion," he says. "Apply a healthy dose of passion to that and you have a good fundraiser. It is fun and inspirational and touches on my values."

In 2016, the foundation used returns from its \$830 million endowment to distribute \$45 million to more than 1,000 charities. Sanzi's enthusiasm for the foundation's work and the diverse causes it supports is palpable. He recently sat down with reporter Barry Bridges to elaborate on how his job as a fundraiser intersects with his legal background.

Q. What led you to the Rhode Island Foundation?

A. I certainly followed a different career path, and I attribute some of it to the values instilled from my legal education. Boston College Law School, without question, always talks about attaching your legal training to a sense of service. And that was a natural fit for me anyway, because that is inherently how I am.

After my time with the Navy JAG I went to work with a law firm in Providence, but I still felt a pull, a longing to help, to get out more, and to serve the community. I was on the board of the Salvation Army at the time, and one of my colleagues there suggested that my personality would be a good fit for fundraising and directed me to the foundation, where I began work in 2008.

Q. So what type of personality is best for fundraising?

A. I've met fundraisers with many different personality traits, but certainly getting your energy from others and from the cause you're supporting is key. I don't find it a far stretch from being a lawyer at all. In fact, lawyers can make fantastic fundraisers.

Think about it: The heart of lawyering is about advocating for a cause, so if you can advocate for a cause that you are also very passionate about, you can be quite effective. That's really the logical chain for a fundraiser.

Q. How would you describe the work that you do? Is it simply bringing in money for the organization?

A. It's so much better than that. I describe it this way: Fundraising is at the intersection of where passion meets opportunity. You're out there with a donor that is passionate about something, trying to make something happen that is important to him or her. If you're a good fundraiser, you are also bringing passion to the table and advocating for your particular charity. And the charity itself, if it's doing its job well, can offer the opportunity to have impact in the area that the donor cares about.

So that's a pretty fun conversation to have with donors. You're out there talking with folks who want to get something done, the foundation actually has the opportunity to get it done, and I'm like the facilitator. That's so much deeper and better than just going out and asking for money.

Q. You've written on the "transformative power of philanthropy." Is that from the perspective of the donor, the recipient or both?

A. It's definitely both. It's probably intuitive that it can be joyful to get something. It should also be fairly intuitive that it is joyful to give. People look at their own experience and know how it makes them feel when they've given something to someone they care about.

There are studies that literally show through MRI imaging that the rewards section of the brain reacts in same or very similar ways when you get something you care about and when you give something to a cause you care about. Even though you don't get anything tangible in return, there's a great psychological and joyful benefit.

Q. How has your legal training informed your position at the foundation?

A. In addition to advocacy, persuasion and the communications skills that are developed through legal training, you also hone the skills required to be efficient in any job, such as prioritization and organization.

I also negotiate with our fund agreements, and of course there is our overall fiduciary duty and the legal concepts behind that. Listening is also critical, in much the same way as it is important for a practicing lawyer in interviewing clients or deposing witnesses.

Q. What has been a highlight of your career here?

A. The foundation has a 101-year history and we receive our gifts from all sorts of donors, whether lifetime gifts or gifts through legacy giving. A highlight for me was last fall when we received a transformative \$28 million unrestricted bequest from the trust of Frederick B. Wilcox, a philanthropist and business leader in Rhode Island many years ago. It's going to have a significant impact.

Q. And what is your least favorite aspect of the job?

A. Instead of using the word "least," I'll talk in terms of challenges. There's no doubt that charities everywhere have needs that typically outweigh resources. The Rhode Island Foundation is the largest funder of the nonprofit sector. The sector has complicated problems that require more than just a lot of money. They require leadership, networks and vision, and they're hard to solve. So the biggest challenge of my job is trying to figure out the best ways to align all of the resources of not just the foundation but also of our partners in trying to effect change in our community.

Q. What would you advise a law student or a lawyer who may be considering a different career path?

A. Many people are using their law degrees in non-traditional ways, so there are plenty of examples, but law school and lawyering, again, is about advocacy and critical thinking. I'd like to think that I've gained an ability to read and assess and think through things at a higher and deeper level because of my legal background.

So I would tell folks to apply that same thought process to their own career. Look in the mirror and ask what it is about your training and/or job that you really like. Peel back the layers of the onion until you get to the core. For me, that core was advocating for causes I'm passionate about.

We all have constraints, but it starts by self-exploration. I would like to think our passion makes us good at what we do.

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