

BRIAN DICKERSON: An eye on history

Ford's hallmark of honesty ingrained in a Grand Rapids lawyer

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GRAND RAPIDS -- Michael Roth's ninth-floor office at Gerald R. Ford's old law firm offers a distant but splendid view of the site where Ford was laid to rest on Wednesday. It's a pretty good metaphor for the way the 38th president has been a constant presence in the young litigator's life, though never at close range.

Roth is 37, the same age at which Ford, then a second-term congressman, became a partner in Law Weathers & Richardson, Roth's current law firm.

The two men never quite came face-to-face. But their families had a storied connection. Roth's grandmother, Leona Wieland, founded a bank in nearby Alto, where the teenage Ford found his first job as a sort of Boy Friday, and the two continued to exchange letters until Wieland's death in 1996.

"She never called him anything but Jerry," Roth recalled Wednesday, "even when he was in the White House."

The model lawyer

Ford's legacy at Law Weathers was more daunting. Founded in 1868, the firm has boasted other prominent partners. But by the time Roth came onboard in 1996, Ford had become the prototype after which all Law Weathers lawyers were encouraged to model themselves.

Senior partner Alan Bennett, the firm's in-house historian, outlined the standard explicitly during Roth's first week on the job.

"He said that a law firm has a culture -- that we tried to be gentleman lawyers, which was what Ford was when he was practicing law and what he continued to be when he became a politician," Roth said. "That we treated our opponents with respect, and that there was no case so important that it was worth compromising our integrity as lawyers."

But what was the practical impact on the way an ambitious young attorney practiced law? I asked skeptically.

"Let me give you a specific example," Roth answered. "Once, when I was prosecuting a drunk-driving case for a municipality we represented, the key police witness said something on the stand that struck



Michael Roth, 37, son Mikey, 9, and daughter Emily, 7, could watch the burial ceremony of former President Gerald R. Ford from Roth's ninth-floor office at Law Weathers & Richardson in Grand Rapids. Ford was a partner in the same law firm. (SUSAN TUSA/Detroit Free Press)

me as inconsistent with the arrest record."

Recalling Bennett's culture lesson, Roth located the relevant document, used it to impeach his own witness' testimony, and got the case dismissed on the spot.

"It had been made clear to me what a member of Gerald Ford's law firm does in that situation," Roth said.

Did you know?

A couple of years ago, not long after he made partner, Roth created Law Weathers' first Web site (www.lwr.com, go to "featured news") and became a serious student of Ford's long affiliation with the firm.

This week, while Army cannoneers practiced their 21-gun salute in a parking lot below his office window, he's been posting little-known anecdotes from Law Weathers' internal lore.

He's written about the way Philip Buchen, a partner at the firm and one of Ford's closest friends, began planning Ford's transition to the presidency in May 1974 -- three months before President Richard Nixon's resignation -- keeping those plans a secret from even the vice president himself. And about Buchen's later tenure as the White House legal counsel, a role in which he once faced down moving crews -- sent by Nixon -- who were attempting to remove Nixon's papers and the infamous secret tapes.

On Wednesday, as Roth waited for his wife and two children to join him for a premium view from his office of the late president's burial ceremony, I asked him whether he ever thought about emulating Ford's political ambitions as well as his legal career.

"Not really," he said, adding that Ford was probably the last elected official in Roth's lifetime to embody his own political values -- fiscal restraint, compassion for the most vulnerable Americans and an abiding respect for local authority.

"I've really soured on politics," he said, echoing Kurt Vonnegut's observation that there are only two kinds of politicians left in America -- winners who tell the people what they want to hear, and losers who tell the truth.

Fantasy foursome

When I marveled that he and Ford had never shaken hands, Roth gazed wistfully at the burial site and shook his head. "He was here, but I was always in court or in deposition, the way trial lawyers are," he said. "And I never acted on my fantasy, which was to arrange a golf outing with him.

"The president, my dad, my son and me -- that was my fantasy foursome," he said. "And I probably could have swung it, if I'd asked."

But in the end, he decided it was not his place to, a stance his modest predecessor at Law Weathers would have certainly have understood.

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