

J. Rock Palermo III: A Tribute

By D'Ann R. Penner; Broussard & David, LLC; Lafayette, Louisiana

I asked LAJ if I could write this column because, like many other members, I miss Rock Palermo. Rock practiced law like he lived — passionately, with an irrepressible sense of humor. Jay Bice, who practiced with Rock, said there was no one better than Rock in a foxhole. Sheriff Tony Mancuso could not remember a time in 17 years when Rock didn't answer his phone eager to serve.

Rock flew sick clients to hospitals in the middle of the night and calmed shaken young deputies after officer-involved shootings. Bessie Daschbach, who managed a portfolio of coastal cases with Rock, recalled that there was no problem too big or too small for Rock to tackle. When an insurance company wanted to depose dozens of Cajuns to bump a trial date, Rock flew Cary Babin from Alexandria to Thibodaux so that he could attend his deposition and still be there for his wife, whose mother died the night before.

Lynn Jones recalled how Rock commanded a mobile command unit for the Calcasieu clerk of court so that the public could be served within a week of Hurricane Laura. Russell Purvis, co-counsel with Rock on several cases, called him “the best trial lawyer I've ever dealt with.” Glad Jones agreed that Rock was an absolute expert in land contamination issues. Jim Garner was impressed by Rock's piercing insight as a leader and his ability to cut through foolishness.

Rock flexed his muscles whenever someone was trying to intimidate his clients. He aggressively defended 20 plaintiffs' depositions in three days to stop an insurance company's effort to humiliate plaintiffs into dropping the case. Rock looked a representative for a Fortune 500 company in the eye

and told him that his clients' children and grandchildren would carry on the fight, adding that he would be in the field when the court made his company dig up the trespassing pipelines.

According to Mike Cash, a brilliant defense lawyer, representing a client “was personal for Rock.” Rock fought for his clients as if they were family, Rock's daughter Rachel explained. Retired Judge Gene Thibodeaux recalled requests for mentoring from young lawyers that he forwarded to Rock: None were turned down. Jay and I credit Rock with making us better lawyers.

Rock was painstakingly honest in court, Jim Swanson remembered. Rusty Stutes recalled a time when Rock risked his livelihood to tell a judge that he and his boss could have deposed a witness had they wanted to.

Rock wasn't a “peacock lawyer.” Tony Mancuso remembered a time when the Sheriff's Department tried to honor Rock with a plaque and Rock left the room in embarrassment. Rock invited Lynn Luker to give a talk about diversity. His effusive introduction left Lynn with a rapt audience. Rock's ego never prevented him from allowing a less experienced lawyer to argue six out of eight motions while he sat second chair at the hearings.

You cannot replace a Rock Palermo. But we can expand his legacy by carrying on his fight for the land and the Louisianans he loved.

J. Rock Palermo — a partner in Veron, Bice, Palermo & Wilson, LLC, Lake Charles, and a longtime LAJ member — died in a plane crash on February 2, 2021.

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Rock Palermo