

Citizen of the Year - Thomas J. Sansone



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Man in the Middle — of It All

Litigator by day, super-volunteer by night is indefatigable Tom Sansone

By Melissa Nicefaro

When Tom Sansone cares about something, good things happen. Sansone is a partner with the firm Carmody & Torrance, practicing commercial law in New Haven. His days consist of representing creditors in bankruptcy proceedings. He's been practicing law for over 25 years and says he enjoys the intellectual stimulation.



"I enjoy getting to learn about people's enterprises — what they do, what they make and how they try to make a living," he explains. "I also like the problem-solving aspect of litigation and the interplay of opposing sides."

It's not just his career that makes him stand out, though. It's his personality. It's his nature.

Because of Sansone's efforts, community programs are being funded, impoverished children halfway across the world are going to school, children here in New Haven are receiving the mental-health help they need. It's all because he cares.

Sansone became involved with the New Haven chapter of United Way in 1997 as a volunteer. Before he joined the group's board of directors, he worked on an initiative to increase the level of donations from area professionals, in particular the legal profession. He worked on a task force with Jack Healey, the current president of the United Way. Sansone says he enjoyed working with the group so much that he eagerly accepted when they asked him to join the board. He served as chairman from 2006-08.

"It's a very committed group of volunteers and paid staff — a great combination," he says. "The United Way has always been lean in the way it staffs its organization, but only because it has such great volunteers." He joined at a time of change for the organization, as it transitioned from a pure fundraising organization to a more broadly impactful entity.

"Rather than sprinkling money on 85 different programs, [the United Way] would pick out the areas in the community

that cried out most for assistance,” he says. From there, the United Way’s Compass program was designed to provide communities a means to identify needs through focus groups. Two chief needs were identified: there were great educational disparities in greater New Haven, and those disparities had a strict correlation with economic health.

The bulk of Sansone’s volunteer efforts focus around education. One of the most profound events of his life came through his work with Christ Episcopal Church in Bethany in the early 2000s when he met Evalyn Wakhusama, a Kenyan minister who was studying for a master’s degree at the Yale Divinity School. Wakhusama was working at the same Bethany church where Sansone was a preacher and Eucharistic minister when the two had many conversations about the underprivileged area of Kenya called Nambali.

“We, with other members of the parish, wanted to do something,” Sansone recounts. “We came up with an idea to build a school.” Christ Church teamed with a Presbyterian church in Noroton and raised \$23,000 to purchase seven acres of land.

“That was the easy part,” Sansone says.

After Wakhusama returned to Kenya, she started an organization called WIKS (Women’s Initiative for Knowledge & Survival) with plans to build a residential school where children orphaned or at risk due to AIDS can attend school in a loving and nurturing environment and thus acquire an education and life skills to prepare them for future study at high school and college. An additional \$350,000 was raised, most through grassroots support and gifts from individual parishioners, and in 2009, the Nambale Magnet School opened with 35 students. Today, there are 220 students at the school, which has students from kindergarten through fifth grade.

The school, according to Sansone, has a rainwater-harvesting collection system, a greenhouse, dairy unit and a chicken coop.

“We wanted not only to make a difference in a student’s life, we wanted to enrich and energize the whole community,” explains Sansone. He was present for the groundbreaking of the school and says it was during a quiet moment on that very hot day that he looked down and saw the cornerstone of the school and realized, “I’ll never do anything as important as this again.”

Stacey Charles of Waterbury would disagree. Now grown and married with a new baby girl, Charles was just eight years old when she first met Sansone. The pesky insistent lawyer whom Charles had no interest in talking to ended up turning her life around.

The two met through the Connecticut Mentoring Partnership while Charles was in third grade in Waterbury.

“They were looking for troubled children who were very quiet and anti-social, and that was me,” she recalls. “They put us together and he was so sweet, trying to get to know me. I was so troubled and I didn’t trust him, but he stayed by my side. I didn’t expect it to work, since we’re so different. He is white and I’m black; he’s a male and I’m a female. Most people would think he would not have had such a positive effect on me.” The program was scheduled to last one year, but every year thereafter Sansone continued to mentor Charles, building a relationship that the two still cherish.

“I got more out of it than she did,” Sansone says. Again, Charles disagrees.

“He helped me blossom. He’s not just a mentor; he’s my father. He’s helped me with college, personal problems, and even financially,” she says. “He’s a very humble person and really doesn’t like a lot of attention.”

“If it weren’t for him,” Charles concludes, “I wouldn’t have what I have.”

It is in Sansone’s nature to give in a quiet and unassuming way. He is on the board of directors at the Clifford Beers Children’s Mental Health Clinic, proud to be celebrating that organization’s centennial in 2013.

“I’m in awe of what they do,” he says.

Alice Forrester, director of the clinic, shares a mutual awe.

“Tom is an incredible supporter of the clinic,” she says. “He is an incredible citizen for New Haven. His legal brain and what he offers in terms of rational thinking and leadership on the board — we’re doubly blessed.”

Sansone was also a Bethany Library Association trustee and member of the Bethany Library Association board of directors from 1997 to 2006. He has received the Connecticut Bar Association’s Distinguished Volunteers recognition, and awards from the United Way of Greater New Haven for Outstanding Volunteer and a Lifetime Achievement Award from the Waterbury Public Schools Partners in Education.

And in his free time, he is an announcer for the Connecticut Dressage & Combined Training Association horse shows, the Bethany Parks & Recreation Department's annual road races and the *Bethany Harvest Festival*. He also sings the National Anthem on key at public events — every note.

The New York Yankee fan spent his 50th birthday not singing the National Anthem, but playing baseball with the Yankees at a fantasy camp in Florida,

“At some point, you just have to say there's more to life than work,” he says. On that topic, Brian Henebry, Carmody & Torrance's managing partner, agrees.