



# PROUD TO BE A PHILADELPHIA LAWYER

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85<sup>TH</sup> CHANCELLOR  
JOHN E. SAVOTH

By Steven H. Eichler

C A S I N O

John and Nancy Savoth on the Boardwalk in  
Asbury Park, N.J.

PHOTOGRAPHED BY John Carlano

**M**eet my dear friend, the 85th Chancellor of the Philadelphia Bar Association, John Edward Savoth. It has been my privilege for 28 years to know John and his accomplished wife, Nancy, to meet each of their boys at birth and beyond and to benefit regularly from his keen insights, cool composure and compassionate concern. It is now my pleasure to introduce you to him.

Philadelphia is 75 miles from John's childhood home in Neptune City, N.J. which on a clear day may be visible from his office on the 52nd floor of Liberty Place. Just south of Asbury Park, N.J., Edward and Catherine Savoth welcomed John, their third son, on Oct. 26, 1958. Brothers Bill and Tom, older by four and two years respectively, were constant sources of older brother-administered "tough love."

Edward Savoth owned and operated Charles P. Savoth & Sons wholesale bananas, a banana ripening and distribution company founded by his father and later run by his son, Bill. If you ate bananas in New Jersey from the 1930s through the 2000s, it's likely they were distributed by Savoth & Sons.

John's formal education began at the Neptune City Elementary School, number one in his graduating class, followed by Neptune High School, Dickinson College and Delaware Law School (Moot Court Honor Society and Mock Trial champion). Following law school, John clerked for two years for the late Justice James T. McDermott of the Pennsylvania Supreme Court – two years that provided stories and memories for decades to follow.

John's early practice years were with Philadelphia trial lawyer William "Bill" Keller at Keller & Associates, until it became Keller & Savoth. In 1996 John formed the Law Offices of John E. Savoth, and in 2003 merged practices with William Fedullo to create Fedullo & Savoth. A testament to the quality of character of both is their ongoing close friendship and mutual respect following John's decision in 2007 to join Saltz, Mongeluzzi, Barrett & Bendesky (SMBB) in an Of Counsel position. Bill will be Vice Chancellor in 2012 and they look forward to working together again.

### A Helping Hand

Bone cancer in his mother Catherine's left arm when John was two was treated by amputation at the shoulder – a 1960 treatment method that spared her life and has her alive and well today at 87. It was then that John's instinct to help those in need first surfaced. "John sensed that I needed help. He would push his little step stool to the counter and hold a bowl I was stirring while providing any other help I may have needed." As he grew, he tied her shoes, helped with jewelry, opened cans and helped with grocery shopping. "John was the one who always volunteered to go grocery shopping to help

me. Of course he got to pick the cereal we would have for the week, which was good thinking on his part."

If John's instinct to help those in need was nurtured by his mother's loss, it may have been his dad's respectful manner and fair treatment of others that influenced John to always treat family, friends, colleagues and

even strangers equally, with courtesy and respect. His father taught him, and John taught his sons, that you owe others courtesy, esteem and respect without regard to status, rank or position.

Edward Savoth also taught self-reliance and did so by example. Catherine struggled, without complaint, to relearn the tasks of daily living with one arm. The story is told in the Savoth family of Catherine's particular difficulty one day opening a jar in the kitchen. Bill Keller jumped to her aid, only to find himself restrained by Edward. Catherine struggled, but opened the jar. Edward had the wisdom to see that Catherine had to develop skills to be independent and to succeed as she had before. Wisdom imparted to John and his brothers, and thereafter by John to his sons. Self-reliance and self-respect as cornerstones for success in all endeavors. Lessons carried forward after Edward's death in 1999.

A significant early influence in John's consideration of the law as a profession was Bill Keller. Bill married John's cousin Cathy when John was five. Bill's oversized personality and passionate pursuit of his cases and myriad endeavors drew John to Bill – and to the law. When years later they began to practice together, family members were happy, but not surprised.

### The Middle Years

John fell in love with Nancy Polhemus before they even met. She cheered the soccer team from the cheerleading squad as he watched the games – her – from the sidelines. They formally met in ninth grade experimental physical science class at Neptune Junior High. Nancy recalls, "he was quiet, very cool, but pretty shy with girls." Today quiet is hard to imagine; cool is hard to deny. He wore his hair fashionably "Afro," played soccer, basketball and baseball and played on the school's golf team. He worked at the family business and through his high school years his life-long love affair with music began to take hold.

He attended Dickinson, studied in Germany, and Nancy attended West Chester University. College distractions aside, they remained loyal and in love. They married on April 24, 1982, and will celebrate their 30th anniversary during John's chancellorship.

"John is a great communicator and a great listener. He is a patient guy who understands people and gets along with people."



The Savoths (clockwise from top) - Alex, John, Nancy, Nate and Evan at their Swarthmore home.



John Savoth is Of Counsel to Saltz Mongeluzzi Barrett & Bendesky PC.

Nancy is an accomplished freelance writer publishing in a wide variety of periodicals and newspapers. She works as an instructor in Widener University’s Writing Center, tutoring students from freshmen to doctoral candidates. She is currently writing a middle-grade novel set in 1970s Asbury Park and Neptune, along with other children’s books that deal with friendship, race, bullying and the environment.

### Family First

Family first – John’s bedrock belief and practice, a way of life clear to me from the moment we met. John and Nancy live in Swarthmore, where they raised Alex (24), Nate (20) and Evan (13). The boys share many of John’s passions, foremost music.

Alex is a graduate of Syracuse University with a BFA in film art. He plays several instruments and sings as he navigates Philadelphia’s music scene. When not performing on stage at area venues, Alex is recording in a studio or serving wine at Tria. He quickly became the family’s wine expert and occasionally tempts John from his single malt to a special vintage.

Nate studies literature in the Honors Program at Temple University where he excels at jazz guitar while youngest son Evan entertains on the keys, spending more time than ever on the family’s piano. Evan can be found most days on Swarthmore College’s soccer field playing a pick-up game when not playing with his own club team.

Music and sports, important legacies from father to sons, take a back seat to legacies of character and conduct. “What I will say about my father is that he is a man of his word. As a child there were a few things that he decided warranted a stern talk, however, the biggest issues were always related to conduct,” says Alex.

The path to Chancellor may vary from year to year, but no one ascends overnight. John’s service record is distinguished and spans 20 years. In that time, he has been a member and chair of the Disciplinary Board of the Pennsylvania

Supreme Court; a member of the Temple American Inn of Court and Public Justice Foundation; Board of Directors, Homeless Advocacy Project; The Justinian Society, Friend of the Justinians; member of the American Association for Justice and Pennsylvania Association for Justice; Chair, YLD Long-Range Planning Committee; Member, Campaign for Qualified Judges; Member, Board of Governors Cabinet; Trustee, Philadelphia Bar Foundation; Member, Board of Governors; Chair, Services Task Force; Co-Chair, Professional Responsibility Committee; Chair, Professional Responsibility Committee; Co-Chair, Committee Review Task Force; Chair, Wachovia Fidelity Award Committee; Assistant Secretary, Board of Governors; Secretary, Board of Governors; Chair, Young Lawyers Division; Vice Chair, Board of Governors; Chair, Board of Governors; Chancellor Elect; Vice Chancellor; and on Jan. 1, Chancellor.

### Multifaceted - Multidimensional

John is witty, educated in the classics and foreign language, well traveled, well read and writes. His passion for music takes him regularly to major and minor performance venues. His iPod? How about just a few offerings: John Coltrane, Bill Frisell, Brad Mehldau, Thelonious Monk, Vijay Iyer, Tom Waits, Frightened Rabbit, Rudresh Mahanthappa, Radiohead, David Bowie, We Were Promised Jetpacks, Sigur Ros and Neptune City’s neighbor and Asbury Park’s native son, Bruce Springsteen - 100 concerts and hopefully counting.

He and the boys attend concerts together. He and Nancy attend concerts together. The full family attends concerts together. Movies, readings, lectures, stage shows, golf, baseball, Yankees and Phillies and YANKEES, YANKEES and YANKEES! And should the Phillies face the Yankees in the World Series during John’s Chancellorship, stay tuned!

I don’t know anyone who reads more. Much of my own reading is at John’s insistence with books arriving from Amazon from time to time marked “must read.” Literature, periodicals, blogs. A short list of his favorite authors – John

Steinbeck, Don DeLillo, Sebastian Barry, Philip Roth, Malcolm Gladwell, Thomas Friedman, Dave Eggers, Mark Halpern, Cormack McCarthy and Ian McEwan. And the periodicals – *The New Yorker*, weekly for 30 years, *Harper's Magazine*, *Outside*, *The Paris Review*, *McSweeney's Quarterly*, *Down Beat*, local, state and national bar magazines and daily, *The New York Times* and *The Philadelphia Inquirer*.

John enjoys cycling and running. He attends Union soccer games, Phillies games and Yankee games. Social scheduling in October is subject to the MLB playoff schedule, and watching John watch a Yankee playoff game is pure entertainment, drama of the highest caliber.

### What Others Say

Of counsel at SMBB, John's office is on the 52nd floor of Liberty Place, at a firm whose talent base quickly exhausts any repertoire of adjectives. Firm managing shareholder and John's friend and colleague, Larry Bendesky, told me that all of the SMBB partners are excited for John's stewardship. "John is a great communicator and a great listener. He is a patient guy who understands people and gets along with people. John's leadership will aid how lawyers in our city are viewed." Larry and his partners believe that John's leadership will follow in the tradition of other great trial lawyers who have led the Philadelphia Bar Association, and cited Alan Feldman and Allan Gordon.

Middle brother Tom shares the irony of looking up to his little brother but admires John's gregarious personality and infectious love of life. "He's always living large." Tom remembers that early in life John admired Atticus Finch. Tom recalls that for as far as his memory goes John was determined to be a lawyer or a rock star. Brother Billy shares a serious note involving John's commitment to family and friendship. "Four years ago after my wife Karen passed away, John continued to call me every single day for more than a year. Not a day went by without him reaching out to me. Whether we talked about the Yankees, or business or our families, his support was there. He just wanted to hear my voice and to make sure that Catelyn, Edward, Chelsea and

I were alright or to know if we needed anything."

Bill Fedullo, John's friend and former law partner, now with Rosen, Schafer & DiMeo, shared that John is the "epitome of a great husband, a great father and a great friend." He described John as "energetic and focused" and as a person who cares deeply for the underserved. Helping others is critical to John's mission and no one should be left out. Bill has no doubt that under John's leadership we are in for a very special year.

White and Williams LLP partner David Creagan, a fellow Swarthmorean and friend for more than 15 years, described John as "always insightful" and whether it is presidential politics or politics of the bar "he has a way of reconciling the ideal with the possible." David offered "John's devotion to his family, especially his wife Nancy and his three sons, Alex, Nate and Evan, is palpable. Equally apparent are John's loyalty to his friends and his compassion for those who have had to struggle in life." To David, "John seems happiest reading and debating the merits of good books, preferably with a wee dram of single malt scotch in hand."

Commander Andy Shelter has known John and Nancy for nearly twenty

years, having met while coaching a T-ball team. Andy shared that John is "tough, smart, honest and as loyal as they come." Shelter served two recalls to active duty, 1990 and 2001, and told me that John "was an enormous help with my family while I was away." In addition "he introduced me to single malt scotch, good jazz and Philadelphia politics."

Natalia Volz lost her husband Pete last year to pancreatic cancer. The Volzes and Savothes met eight years before at a baseball game in Swarthmore. The friendship blossomed and they began to travel to Maine together each summer. After Pete's diagnosis, "John was one of the first people at Pete's side. He didn't use clichés to placate. John listened, invited Pete for walks, to hang out, to watch Phillies games. He didn't tell Pete how to feel or how to act, he was just there for Pete and he was there throughout the grueling 19 months right to the end of Pete's life. John is as real, as giving, as genuine as they get."

Welcome John Edward Savoth – our next Chancellor. ■

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*Steven H. Eichler (seichler@margolisedelstein.com), is a partner with Margolis Edelstein.*



The brothers Savoth - Tom, Bill and John - with their mother, Catherine.