



# 10 QUESTIONS for

Louis S. Rulli

DIRECTOR OF CLINICAL PROGRAMS, UNIVERSITY OF PENNSYLVANIA LAW SCHOOL

## INTERVIEW BY MICHAEL J. CARROLL

**A**fter serving the public for more than two decades as an attorney for and then executive director of Community Legal Services, Louis Rulli moved into academia to teach the next generation of lawyers about how the law can best serve all citizens and the public interest. He taught full-time at University of Pennsylvania Law School and as of July 1 became the director of the law school's clinical programs. Throughout his career, he has remained a vital resource to the Philadelphia public interest community and a vital advocate for legal aid services in the city.

**Michael J. Carroll:** Let's start with an easy one. What drives you? What keeps Lou Rulli getting out of bed on those Monday mornings in February?

**LOUIS S. RULLI:** I love what I do. And that's the easy, simple and honest answer. I always have, and as long as I keep loving what I do, I'll be getting up even in February to come to work. I think it all begins in humble beginnings, if I can say it that way. I was born and raised in New York City. I lived in public housing for my first fifteen years, in a very loving family of very modest means, and I gained a deep appreciation for what I think are the most important things about life. And not included on that list is material wealth. What is included is fairness, decency, respect and helping others. So I think what drives me is probably all of that. The great

desire to want to do good. I'm always optimistic. I like people and I like being a lawyer, and I like seeing when the law can help solve problems and do something good.

**Are there any political or religious roots in your family that helped to inspire you?**

I think there are things that inspired me from my family. First and foremost, I start with my father, who was someone who really embodied in my mind what Tom Brokaw was trying to say about the Greatest Generation. He served in the Navy during the Second World War, and he was on the U.S.S. Yorktown, a major aircraft carrier, that was damaged at the big Battle of the Coral Sea

and then ultimately was sunk at Midway. He was on it when it was sunk. I'm glad that he was picked up by another ship, otherwise I wouldn't be here. What he taught me, though, is public service in giving to others. Of course, I don't know that I could ever appreciate what it really meant to be part of that generation, to give the way that generation gave to America to preserve our democracy. But he instilled in me the importance of what we all do as citizens for our democracy and for our country.

Also, my mother was an immigrant. She was born in Sicily. She helps me to understand how important it is that we treat every immigrant in this country with dignity and respect, and understand that folks come to this great country in search of a better life. We

have an obligation. Sometimes we don't meet that obligation in difficult times. She's helped me to keep centered and focused on that. Probably even more importantly, she's kept me focused on family and food. I come from an Italian family — a large, extended Italian family — and the opportunity to get together on Sunday afternoons over pasta with a big family is one of the great joys. It's really one of the great building enterprises for I think all of us.

**Early work experiences can be very influential and informative. Tell us about the first job you remember, and then tell us about that first legal job.**

I agree with you. I think that all jobs are very formative. In college, I had a little of every job, and I think that's really good. It helped to give me a better experience of different kinds of work, of different kinds of things that are important to people in different workplaces. I've worked in factories, and I've worked in department stores, and anywhere I could to raise a few bucks to pay for school. In fact, if I think about my first job, I actually worked at Fort Dix for two summers under a program that was set up as really a part of the war on poverty. I lived in New York, and the New York Navy Yard was closed. My father was now a civilian employee, and they gave him a choice: He could relocate the family to Philadelphia or to Guam. My father picked Guam; my mother said, "We're going to Philadelphia." That's how I got down to this area. But I worked at Fort Dix in a program established to help teens of modest income to begin to get acclimated to the workplace. And I think that's a very important initiative that we probably need a lot more of in America today.

The first job in college was an internship in government. It was a great opportunity to work very closely with a town manager in a large suburban town, and also to attend classes at Princeton University that brought together theory and practice. This is where I was first introduced to the notion of merging theory and practice. If academic institutions are to succeed, in my judgment, they have to merge theory and practice. Both are critical. So here I was first introduced to how we can make a real difference for ordinary citizens through public service in government. I think it had a big impact on my career plans because I was originally an engineering major in college, and I shifted to political science and ultimately law.

My externship to Community Legal Services was an introduction to a great organization with which I fell in love, and knew from that day on that I wanted to work in. I began in that externship at Law Center West under an extraordinary person who would become my mentor, and whom I would admire then and continue to admire for an entire lifetime, and that of course is Janet Stotland. Janet was the managing attorney at Law Center West, a tremendously gifted, talented, caring individual who really gave me my start and taught me more than I think she'll ever know, and I'm forever grateful.

**When you were growing up did you know any lawyers, and what did you think they did? Looking back now, what do you think they did?**

I was the first person from my extended family to go to college. We had no lawyers in the family, so I didn't know lawyers growing up. My concept of what lawyers did was watching Perry Mason and television. I think largely, America still gets its view of lawyers from what they see on television. That can be good, and it can be bad.

There's one television show that clearly inspired me, although I didn't realize then how much it probably inspired me. It was "The Young Lawyers." It was a show that was premised on the notion that an experienced lawyer would leave practice, go to a law school, I guess it was Harvard Law School, and supervise law students in

the practice of law. And those law students would do phenomenal work in representing clients, mostly in a criminal setting, as I recall it. But I still remember watching that show and thinking that's a pretty neat thing to do.

**You adjusted well from CLS to the University of Pennsylvania. What were some of the big differences in the cultures of the two organizations?**

Well, Community Legal Services is a grassroots community-based organization. At its best, it brings together the community, enormously talented staff, an active and interested Board of Trustees, and that's a great, great partnership. Obviously, academic institutions are different, and they have a different mission. But what attracted me to the University of Pennsylvania Law School was the ability to continue to have an impact and most hopefully upon the next generation of lawyers. I see my work at the University of Pennsylvania Law School, which is a great, great institution, as really an extension of what I was doing before. It's the opportunity to work with bright and talented law students, to get them to see the world as it really is, to get them to see the law as it really is. Sometimes a wonderful connection, sometimes a total disconnect. And to apply their talents to making the promise of equal justice under law a reality for all citizens.

**Did you have any other mentors in your life besides Janet?**

Well, I think mentors play a critical role. I say to law students when they leave law school, look for people to work with, with whom you share values, and from whom you can learn, and who are generous with their time and their talents. Janet Stotland was every bit of that for me. But I think mentors can be from afar, or not necessarily folks who you work with on a daily basis. And I want to share my thoughts about two judges who were not necessarily mentors by any means, but who inspired me to want to think about what a career in the law should mean. The two judges, both of whom are no longer with us, are very different but they're both extraordinary in their own ways.

The first is Judge Nicholas Cipriani. Judge Cipriani was one of the first judges that I ever appeared before as a young lawyer at Community Legal Services. And I knew right from the beginning that this was an extraordinary individual. He embodied what I thought a judge really should display. He cared deeply about each and every case. He sat in Family Court on some of the most emotionally troubling cases, and you could see him agonize about each and every case, wanting to do the right thing. And I could see in looking at him, as if this was my grandfather, struggling to solve the problem and to keep strong the family. He treated everyone with great respect — lawyers but, more importantly, every litigant that came before him, no matter how poor or no matter how rich. And he traveled to court each day on the bus from South Philadelphia. He never lost his connection to community, to family, and it was a great privilege to be able to appear before him and to know that the law was in good hands when Judge Cipriani was sitting on the bench.

The second judge is entirely different — A. Leon Higginbotham. It's as if the Constitution itself was embodied in this enormous talent and figure that was bigger than life. Judge Higginbotham, with his booming voice, really embodied to me what a civil rights lawyer and a civil rights judge was all about. To be in his presence was an extraordinary honor. And to listen to his stories about what advocacy in the South as a civil rights lawyer in the courtroom was all about was unbelievable. As we think about equal justice under law, we think about what judges ought to be — if we can think about the

qualities that Judges Cipriani and Higginbotham brought to their work, it's a great, great lesson for all of us. And we don't always recognize and appreciate the giants that are among us until they're no longer here.

**Are your children considering taking a career path similar to yours? Would you want them to?**

I'm blessed with a wonderful family: my wonderful wife, Carole, we've been married now for 32 years; and I have two children who I am immensely proud of — a son, Steve, who is 28, and a daughter, Anne Marie, who is 22. What do I wish for them? I wish for them the same happiness and fulfillment that I've achieved in my own life. And that should be whatever path they want to take. My father, who had a different career path, never said to me that I had to follow in his career path, and he didn't say not to, either. I think both my mother and father instilled in me the importance of education, the importance of working hard at whatever you do, and making a difference. That's what I would like for my children in whatever path that might be.

**Law school is expensive. What do you tell a student who comes to you and says, "Professor Rulli, I would like to go into public interest law after graduation, but I just can't afford to." Is your answer any different for a first semester, first year student, versus a first semester, third year student?**

Student loan forgiveness and repayment assistance is one of the most important challenges for the profession. That's why I've been co-chairing a task force of the Pennsylvania Bar Association for the last several years. We have presented a report to the House of Delegates that has been adopted by the House, calling for recommendations to establish a statewide program that would provide for loan forgiveness and repayment assistance. I think we have to solve this problem. Legal education is expensive and it is foreclosing opportunities for talented, committed, dedicated law students from entering public service. For those who have entered public service and find that after a few years of really developing expertise and giving back that they have to leave because of financial constraints when they want to buy a house and raise a family, it is not fair to them that they should not have the opportunities to take their career paths with their hearts want to take them and where our society needs them.

My hope would be that the Senate and House would act on that legislation this term and that we would begin to provide effective statewide mechanism so that I could say to first-year law students, and I could say to third-year law students, and I could say to third-year attorneys that there is financial assistance to enable you to give back to this community. Until that happens, I'm going to continue to work on this effort. I've learned certainly one thing as a public interest lawyer, and that is that change does not come easy or quickly. But I think this is a cause worth pursuing and worth continuing, until we achieve it. Our society needs their talents, and we short-change society when we foreclose opportunities because education has become expensive. And frankly, it just cannot be paid back.

**What are your goals for the clinic at this point?**

I have some goals. On July 1, I'll be taking over as director of the clinical programs here at the University of Pennsylvania Law School, and it's a great honor and a great privilege to be able to do so. I follow in the steps of my good friend and colleague, Doug Frankel, who has had that position for many years, and I believe has done a great job in building the clinical programs here at Penn

that attracted me to come and teach here.

My goal is first and foremost to make sure that those efforts continue and continue to grow. But I think we also need to look at what the great challenges are ahead for the profession and for our students coming out of law school. We need to prepare them for being integral partners in making law the distinguished profession that it is and that it needs to be in a global society in which our democracy is challenged at every turn and in which, disturbingly, the gap between rich and poor is growing. So if our justice system is to work, it's going to need the full commitment of every lawyer. My challenge for the clinic is to prepare law students for all of the challenges of what it means to be a lawyer and a leader in our society. And that's a tall challenge. But I think through clinical education we merge theory and practice. We expose law students to how the law really works. We show students that problems can be solved, and that lawyers can be problem solvers if they apply their talents and their creativity and their passion to serving people.

**Where do you go from here? What does the next 10 or 20 years hold for you?**

No one really knows the future, and I don't pretend to know the future, but my guess is it will remain here in Philadelphia. I love Philadelphia. And I think there are so many unfinished challenges, that I hope that I can spend whatever remaining years I have confronting those challenges. You know that one of the great challenges that I worked on both as executive director of Community Legal Services, and after I left CLS, is to build strong partnership that produces reliable, dependable funding for civil legal services to the poor. When I was at CLS, I watched it as our funding was taken away from us by the stroke of a pen — of the president, of the governor — and I saw the havoc that that created with client communities, with our staff and closing of offices. It was very clear to me that we had to build a dependable, non-political reliable funding mechanism for civil legal services to the poor. That's why I worked hard with so many others on IOLTA — Interest on Lawyers' Trust Account program — first as a voluntary program through the Legislature, and ultimately as a mandatory program through the Supreme Court. I worked hard on access to justice, as a civil filing fee add-on, in order to provide a non-political funding source. We have to continue with those challenges in looking forward as to what additional ways we can give programs like legal services the funding it needs to bring equal justice to all of our citizens.

We are working on Civil Gideon as a concept in Pennsylvania and across the nation. By Civil Gideon, we raise the question of whether or not there should be a right to counsel in civil matters that are so fundamental and vital to the needs and interests of the litigants. You know, at one point in our country's history, there was no right to counsel in a criminal matter prior to *Gideon v. Wainwright*. Imagine facing the loss of your liberty, of being incarcerated without any access to counsel. Today we look back at that and say, how could we ever think that a justice system was just, or that due process of law meant anything if you didn't have counsel to protect you when you faced the loss of liberty? I believe that one day, we will look back in the same way to our civil justice system and say, how did we ever think that we could take children away from parents, take homes away from homeowners, or take public benefits or health coverage away from citizens without having access to a lawyer to protect your rights? So I think that's one of the great challenges ahead. ■

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