

Partners in Justice

Law firm, SUNY president honored at Ulster reception



The law firm of Rusk, Wadlin, Heppner and Martuscello was honored recently by the Legal Services of the Hudson Valley. Pictured L-R Rita Worthington, Pat Voerg, Kristine Williams, Jean Salazer, Pamela Burger, John G. Rusk Esq., Ashley Swenson, Christine H. Guido Esq., Diane MacCreery, Daniel J. Rusk Esq., Lori Guillon, Marion Carr, Megan Higgins, Melissa Manna-Williams Esq., Nikolas Tamburello, Darlene Bell, Daniel G. Heppner Esq., John J. Wadlin Esq., Jason J. Kovacs Esq. and Pamela D. Rusk Esq.

By **MARK REYNOLDS**
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Recently the law firm of Rusk, Wadlin, Heppner and Martuscello and Dr. Alan Roberts, President of SUNY Ulster, were honored by the Legal Services of the Hudson Valley at a special "Ulster Partners in Justice Reception" at the Stonehedge Restaurant in West Park. Proceeds from the event will go to support Legal Services, whose mission is to, "provide free, high quality counsel in civil matters for individuals and families who cannot afford to pay an attorney where basic human needs are at stake." They assist in domestic violence situations, defend seniors against abuse, serve veterans on the home-front,

support the rights of the disabled, make sure that LGBTQ individuals are free from discrimination, promote children's well-being and work to keep families in their homes.

The law firm, founded in 1870, is the oldest in Ulster County. They were honored as a "Champion of Justice," for their outstanding business achievements and for their philanthropy and wide-ranging engagement with the community.

The firm was launched by John Rusk Sr., a native of Ireland, who opened an office in the hamlet of Marlboro. After his death in 1905, his son and grandsons continued to grow the business over the years. A Kingston office was added in 1957, while a fourth generation of the Rusk family, George Rusk Jr, joined

the firm in 1959. In the 1960s new faces entered the picture - Bernie Freeney, Tom Plunket and John Wadlin - and in 1984 the firm became known as Rusk, Wadlin, Heppner and Martuscello, that included Dan Heppner and Dan Martuscello. In the 1980s a fifth generation of the Rusk family joined - John G. Rusk and Daniel J. Rusk along with John's wife, Pamela D. Rusk.

The firm now offers a wide range of legal advice and representation in commercial litigation, family law and real estate transactions, bankruptcy, personal injury cases, estate planning and estate administration.

Dan Martuscello joined the firm in

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1976 and serves as the ADA in the Marlborough Court and with Judge Gene Rizzo in Highland. He also handles real estate transactions and family law cases. He said the partners work well together.

"It's like a sports team; when you have good chemistry things go well," he said. "We're a well diversified office, one that works together and our paramount focus is our clients."

Partner John Rusk has been a lawyer for 30 years and is the 5th generation to be involved in the firm. He initially wanted to become a philosophy professor, finding wills and estate work not very exciting. But after watching partner Dan Heppner do some trial work at the urging of his father, a then young Rusk was hooked; "Now this is something I can do and that's when I made the decision that I would go to law school after that summer." He finds the dynamics of the courtroom with a jury and a judge, one lawyer against another and the rules of law and the rules of evidence "very interesting."

John's brother, Dan said the special honor from Legal Services of the Hudson Valley is "exciting." He said he has played a small part in the history of the firm, noting that, "I've been around the least, but it's a real testament to the five generations of a continuous law firm that has represented Ulster County. It's a nice tribute, it's a nice turnout and it's humbling to see the people who come out for it."

Daniel Heppner said the evening, "is a lovely honor. The fact that we can contribute to legal aid and helping

people to get legal representation is what's so important. It is very difficult for people that don't have the means to actually get justice and the money that is raised by this hopefully will help some poor person get some justice."

John Wadlin has been with the firm for 48 years, handling mostly estate work and real estate. He said the firm being honored, "was very nice. It's really unusual for a family like this to go on all these years." Wadlin started his career in 1970 at the age of 26 with the grandfather and great uncle of John and Dan, who were then in their 70s, "and here I am in my mid 70s working with the 5th generation." Wadlin loves the challenge of a solving a unique legal situation.

"All the things that come in are different; there are very few routine things. You solve problems, that's what we do," Wadlin said.

Pamela Rusk said the firm is fortunate to have had such longevity in the legal field, "and ongoing connections with families in the Hudson Valley, which is pretty unique and unusual; we're glad to be in this community."

Dr. Alan Roberts and SUNY Ulster were acknowledged as Advocates for Justice for creating easier access to higher education for students and for single mothers. He said these programs were established to help the economically disadvantaged in the county earn a certificate or degree from the college. He said the college has helped with additional support services where needed, such as remediation at the high school level, child care, transportation and the purchase of textbooks.

"These are unique programs focused on reaching out more than what a typical college would do," he said.

"We believe our mission is to be able to break the cycle of poverty through education and I think they have been recognizing a number of things that we've been doing."

Dr. Roberts said the college has established a fundraising program specifically aimed at helping this part of the community. He said they reach out to individual donors and propose that they help a single student by paying for two years at the college, which is about \$7,200. He noted that the students are chosen in the 9th grade, well before they go to SUNY Ulster, "and that donor is able to watch the progress of that student from the 9th through the 12th grade, be involved with them and then watch them graduate SUNY in two years." At the end of 2018 there were 106 eighth grade students, "and we have individual donors for each one of those students."

Dr. Roberts said in the three years that the program has existed they have all nine county school districts on board.

"It has exceeded our expectations ten-fold, beyond our wildest imagination," he said.

The program to help single mothers has been in development for 18 months and will kick off this spring.

Dr. Roberts shies away from taking credit for these initiatives, but praises the entire SUNY Ulster community for starting and promoting these unique programs.

"Being able to share this with my colleagues, staff, administrators and trustees is really special. It's nice to be able to look back at them and say you're being recognized for this outstanding work that you're doing. That probably is the thing that means the most to me."