

A Colleague's Kindness

By Carol Steinberg



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I was an experienced trial lawyer by the time I was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis in 1995. I kept trying cases when I developed a limp, when I later depended on the courtroom chairs for balance, and then when I used a cane to stand in front of the jury.

My need for a wheelchair in 2004 called my career into question. The desire to keep fighting for justice still burned, but I wondered if I could continue to do so in court. My husband encouraged me: "You'll be like Ironside!" He didn't know that the TV character, made famous on television by actor Raymond Burr, was a detective, not a lawyer, who used a wheelchair. (He was obviously fusing Ironside with Burr's other TV character—lawyer Perry Mason.) His point was made, though, and it gave me the intended push. For 10 years, I've been zipping around courtrooms in my motorized chair, trying to persuade juries of the righteousness of my cause, winning sometimes and losing sometimes, as I did before, and proud of myself.

And I've had help in this endeavor whenever I needed it. Rob, my law partner for 24 years, made my work life possible.

Ever since law school in the late '70s, I had known about this tall, dignified lawyer striding around Boston courtrooms, defending demonstrators, representing tenant organizations sued by landlords, suing not only landlords but also the lead paint industry on behalf of poisoned kids. I knew he went to Wounded Knee in North Dakota to represent the American Indian Movement. I saw him at dinners for the Massachusetts Lawyers Guild, which he cofounded. Through the '80s, I practiced in a fine firm, but Rob's was where I aspired to be. I finally got to join him in 1990.

Our offices were side by side in his eight-person firm, dedicated to trying to get justice for people who'd been hurt by the carelessness of others. When the firm broke up in 1998, I was stunned and flattered that Rob

asked if I wanted to practice with him alone. "Are you sure about this?" I asked. "Why not?" was his answer, and for 16 years it was just the two of us. Adventures and jokes were abundant; disputes rare.

He knew I had MS when he asked. He didn't blink as it progressed. He never questioned my ability to keep fighting. He just went about making it easier for me. When it got difficult for me to carry to court the piles of paper I needed, he brought them for me, leaving me to try the cases on my own, as I requested. When I used a walker, he'd accompany me at the end of the day to the parking space I rented across the street from our office. More than once, I'd fall in the middle of the street. Without alarm, ignoring my embarrassment, he'd lift me up and we'd continue on.

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When I started using a wheelchair and was having trouble fitting into the bathroom in our office, he came in with the tools to take the bathroom door off its hinges and change its swing from in to out. I hadn't even asked.

We started trying the cases together then—dividing the openings, closings, and witness examinations up fifty-fifty. When the judges wouldn't come down to low tables to talk to us, he'd take the lead on matters that took place at their high podiums, like jury selection or sidebar conferences.

Until May 1 of this year, when Rob died of a heart attack, I had what I needed: two indispensable partners. One always has the coffee brewed and a mug on the counter for me in the kitchen in the morning; one always had a cup steaming on my office desk by the time I sat down.

Recently I tried changing the firm's letterhead from our names together to mine alone. I don't think I'll do that again for a while.

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