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In Chambers

'Willing to help anyone who needs his help'

By Jerry Crimmins
Law Bulletin staff writer

"A real saint," Cook County Circuit Judge Patrick T. Murphy said, "is a guy like Tom."

"Tom is ... Obi-Wan Kenobi," said Anthony Lowery, director of policy and advocacy for the Safer Foundation.

In the words of state Rep. Mary E. Flowers, D-Chicago, "I could not imagine my political career without him. ... Tom is just an awesome man."

They're all referring to Thomas J. Grippando.

In his unassuming Clark Kent role, Grippando is a judge for the Cook County Department of Administrative Hearings.

In Room 1140 of the County Building, he hears minor violations of the county building code, or cases of failure to pay the Cook County cigarette tax, or environmental control cases often about asbestos, or dog-bite cases.

"We get about 10 to 15 dog-bite cases a month," he said.

But Grippando, 71, also has a long career in working for the welfare of poor children and the poor in general, through class-action lawsuits, writing legislation and guiding policy from inside local government agencies, according to Murphy and those who know him.

Today in his off hours, Grippando plays a special role for non-profit organizations who lack knowledge about legislation.

"Any organization in the city and the state who may have an issue they want to present to legislators in Springfield, Tom will, at his own expense and own time, draft and research it and help to present it to the legislators in a way that is acceptable to get sponsorship for the legislation," Lowery said. "He's truly a great spirit, always there to help.

"I don't think there's ever been a request that I've made" or any other non-profit organization made, "that's been refused by Tom Grippando. ... He's working throughout the night. He's working through the day doing administrative judge work. He's just a ball of fire."

"If I heard it once, I heard it a dozen times from lawyers, state's attorneys and judges: 'Where did you get that guy?'" said John R. Weinrauch, director of Cook County's new Department of Administrative Hearings.

In addition to Grippando's work for non-profit

continued...



Thomas J. Grippando
Administrative Law Judge
Cook County Department of
Administrative Hearings

Appointed: 2009

Career highlights: Attorney for U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, 1963-1965; Peace Corps, 1965-1967; staff attorney, Community Legal Counsel, 1967-1971; attorney Legal Aid Society, 1972-1973; attorney Legal Assistance Foundation of Chicago, 1974-1975; supervising attorney Cook County Legal Assistance Foundation, 1976-1987; deputy Cook County Public Guardian, 1987-1989; attorney Legal Aid Bureau, 1989-1994; special assistant to Public Guardian, 1994-2004; assistant Cook County public defender, 2004-2007; contractor with Coordinated Advice and Referral Program for Legal Services, 2007-2008

Age: 71

Law school: DePaul University College of Law, 1963

Interests: Lobbying and listening to music

groups, he drafts legislation for the Cook County Department of Administrative Hearings from inside the government.

"We're lucky to have him, particularly at the start-up level," said Weinrauch, whose department was created last year.

"Nothing's in place, and sometimes we have to be creative," he said, adding that Grippando "has a creative approach to law."

Grippando has worked for the Office of the Cook County Public Guardian, the Public Defender's Office, three or four legal aid organizations in Chicago, and the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development.

Murphy said that through it all Grippando has worked for and represented "the poor and disenfranchised, giving them the same type of representation Jenner & Block gives to their clients. ... He's my hero."

Grippando was born and raised on the West Side around Chicago and Kedzie avenues near Garfield Park. When he was 9, his family moved to the Jefferson Park neighborhood.

He went to Quigley Preparatory Seminary to study for the Catholic priesthood, but left after four years and attended college and law school at DePaul University.

He said he became a lawyer because of a Blackjack game. While playing cards in college, another player mentioned that after three years at DePaul, if you finished all the courses for your major, you could do your senior year in law school.

He got hooked on law in that first year. His first job as a lawyer was for the Department of Housing and Urban Development.

"I basically reviewed applications from municipalities who wanted to knock down neighborhoods and renew them. Remember that was the craze. My job was to find fault with the applications. We found fault."

In 1965, after 18 months with HUD, he joined the Peace Corps and went to Chile as a lawyer.

From 1967 to 1987, he worked for several legal aid groups in Chicago and its suburbs.

"We became jacks of all trades," he said.

He not only represented poor people in individual matters, he also filed class-action

lawsuits, such as one that he said forced Cicero to allow Section 8 housing and another that forced the Illinois Department of Public Aid to liberalize its rules on paying for children's medical expenses.

In 1987, Grippando joined Murphy's Office of the Cook County Public Guardian as deputy public guardian. There he administered a new program whereby the guardian's office represented abused and neglected children in court cases that would determine whether the children should be removed from their parents.

By 1989, "I was tired of abuse and neglect for a while," Grippando said.

"The idea is OK, we have to take these kids from these terrible parents" but the whole foster care system was also a mess and harmful to many children, he said.

So Grippando went to the Legal Aid Bureau Metropolitan Family Services in 1989 to assist people in getting public benefits.

Again, he handled individual cases and filed class-action lawsuits, such as one that he said forced the state of Illinois to adopt better standards for people seeking Medicaid benefits.

In 1994, he returned to the Public Guardian's Office to be Murphy's special assistant. This time, his efforts were directed at reducing the time Illinois' neglected children spent in legal limbo, Grippando said. He worked to get them into permanent care through easier adoption standards, private guardianship or long-term foster care.

"He worked until 8, 9, 10 o'clock at night for the public guardian and took the El home from Juvenile Court," Murphy said. "He lived on candy from the candy machine. Even after he had a heart attack, I think he ate peanuts from the machine instead of candy bars. He just has no concern about himself. He'll work until the work is done."

By 2004, Grippando said he thought "the pendulum had gone too far as far as terminating parental rights. We were terminating too many."

He jumped to the Cook County Public Defender's Office, where he expected to be assigned to Juvenile Court's Abuse and Neglect Division. This time he planned to defend parents who were threatened with loss of their parental rights.

But the Public Defender's Office put him in a policymaking position. He said he got a bill passed in Springfield to make it more likely that if a child was removed from his or her parents, the child would be placed with relatives.

He was laid off in 2007 because of county budget cuts and went to work for CARPLS, the Coordinated Advice & Referral Program for Legal Services. There he "put together an encyclopedia on poverty law," he said.

Through many of these years, from 1976 to 2003, Grippando also was co-director of the Law Program for Community Developers and Social Workers at The John Marshall Law School, a "very demanding" part-time job where he trained social service providers in how to protect people through the law.

Since 2007, Grippando has been an unpaid volunteer for the Public Defender's Office, lobbying the state legislature for bills related to employment of people with criminal records and legal treatment of neglected children.

"I have known Tom for 40 years," Murphy said. "Saints to read about are gooey people you don't want to spend any time with. A real saint is a guy like Tom."

Flowers said Grippando has helped her with "all kinds of legislation," including bills affecting child welfare and limiting wage garnishments for parents, legislation requiring that parents of children in mental health facilities be notified before their children are given psychotropic drugs, and now nursing home standards.

"He's willing to help anyone who needs his help," Flowers said.

As a judge since May 2009, Weinrauch said Grippando is "very well-balanced. He looks at both points of view. ... I think he's fair."

"It's a nice job," Grippando said of being a judge. "I like the simplicity of it all. None of these long continuances. Each side gets to tell their story. ... I really find myself and the others [other administrative law judges] really try to do a good job in making sure that the decisions are based on the evidence and where liability does not exist, no judgment or order will be entered against the respondent."