

Chris Chiafullo: *Not Your Grandfather's Lawyer.*

By David Hirschman

On a recent afternoon, a large flat-screen TV is delivered to Chris Chiafullo's office. Talking on the phone to a client, all business, his eyes suddenly light up when he sees the massive cardboard box outside his door.

"It's for playing video games," Chiafullo winks after hanging up the phone. He measures a spot on the wall above his bookcase earmarked for the TV with evident satisfaction. The bookcase itself, coincidentally, sports figurines of the 'Incredible Hulk' and a character called 'Mr. Wonderful' alongside his weathered and obviously oft-used law books. Framed diplomas on the wall touting his undergraduate degree, Master's degree, and law degree are offset by a prominently displayed iPod and speakers.

While more uptight lawyers at other firms might not showcase these kinds of personal accoutrements, or even make passing references to video games, they seem natural to Chiafullo. It's clear that he's less interested in impressing clients with his gravitas, and concentrates more on making them feel comfortable.

"I'm really the 'everyman's-lawyer,'" says the thirty-something Chiafullo, leaning back in his chair. "I'm just a normal guy. I used to work at a bar. I mean, I used to hang drywall. I used to flip burgers and I used to drive a hearse. I work hard and I do the job right - no matter what the job is - so at the end of the day, I'm no different than my hard-working clients, and that's why they trust me."

Whitney Chelnik, his partner at The Chiafullo Group, LLP ("the Group"), says this decidedly "unlawyerly" approach exemplifies the way Chiafullo lives his life and practices law; he's personable, unpretentious, and outspoken in dealing with clients and other lawyers. And while he treats everyone with respect, Chelnik also says Chiafullo is pragmatic, visceral, decisive, and honest "to the extent of being somewhat annoying."

"What you see is what you get with Chris," says Chelnik. "He doesn't put on airs, and there's not a lot of mincing words or hand-holding and coddling, but if he tells you something you know that's how he feels."

Ron Catelli, who knew Chiafullo in high school and then



later worked with him as a law clerk, says that he has always had a blunt honesty.

"From the beginning, he was always absolutely one of the most completely straightforward guys you'd ever meet," says Catelli. "In that way he's kind of a throwback. Everyone knows right when they meet him that you can shake his hand and take that to the bank."

Chiafullo bemoans the fact that he doesn't always "have time" to ensure that he's the most popular guy in the room, because what he really cares about is "cutting through the bullsh*t" and getting results. And, to this end, he values honesty above all things.

"I wear my heart on my sleeve," he says. "I'm not looking to screw you. If I don't like you, you'll know I don't like you. I'm not one of these guys who shakes your hand and then, when you walk away, bashes you. And people respect me for that."

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Chiafullo was born to Italian/Irish-American parents in Long Branch, New Jersey. His family owned a restaurant on the ground floor of their home, and his father made pizzas day-in and day-out during Chiafullo's youth. Chiafullo says that his father's dedication to the restaurant made him understand the importance of working hard.

"One of the main things that my father instilled in me was this sense of dedicating yourself to what you do," says Chiafullo. "While my mother always stressed education, my father had this attitude that there's nothing wrong with waking up early and working late; there's nothing wrong with making pizzas, or digging ditches, or chopping firewood, or working at the racetrack. My father worked damn hard when I was growing up, and I wanted to be just like him."

Something else his father gave him, says Chiafullo, was the uncanny ability to break issues down to their simplest form in an effort to make effective decisions.

"He taught me that most things are no more difficult than X, and the only thing that you need to do is strip everything away to see what X is," says Chiafullo. "Lawyers will try to complicate things so that lay people are impressed, and feel like they are paying their money for something worthwhile; yet it's much easier to solve problems when you break it down to the basics. My clients really appreciate that uncomplicated, common-sense, 'lowest common denominator' approach."

Always an overachiever in high school and college, Chiafullo's "magnetic" personality lent itself to an uncanny ability to "always get what he wants," says his roommate at Boston University, Frank LaRusso. "He knows he has the bandwidth and the brains to get anything, and nothing stops him."

LaRusso detailed Chiafullo's unflappable drive fondly. "He is really attracted to the hunt and the art of the deal," says LaRusso. "When he and I would throw parties back in Boston, it wasn't the actual party he'd talk about at the end of the night. Instead, he'd tell you the story about how he'd negotiated down the beer salesman's prices, or convinced our landlord to allow the party in the first place, or cajoled the local authorities to believe that despite the fact they were responding to a noise complaint, there really wasn't any noise at all. This was

what was critical in his mind, this skill to get people to see things his way."

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When Chiafullo and Chelnik formed the Group in 2005, they made a pact that it wouldn't be like the stodgy law firms they had both worked at in the past.

"My mantra for us is that we are not your grandfather's law firm," chuckles Chiafullo, "because that's not today's environment. It's not like the old days when a 'Scopes monkey trial' took place every week. [Today, a lawyer may only try one or two major cases in his or her lifetime. Almost everything these days is resolved before trial, or short-circuited before the lawsuit is even filed,](#)

[because it's just too expensive to try cases.](#) So being an attorney isn't necessarily about trying cases anymore; it's about getting to a resolution."

As a result, he says, the job of an attorney has become closer to that of a consultant or an advisor, or in Italian parlance, a consigliere. Chiafullo says bigger firms aren't able to act as well in this capacity, and that this kind of personal attention to clients is what makes the Group distinctive.

"Resource-wise, we can do anything that the biggest law firm in New York City can do," says Chiafullo. "But the big firms rely on their self-bloated reputations and penchant for over-billing. That's an old school attitude. I view

the Group like a finely-tuned strike force, one that makes its clients feel well-represented and confident without draining their life savings. There are very few large firms that have our combination of professionalism, personal attention and individual care for clients."

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In high school, Chiafullo worked his summers at a nightclub called Bar Anticipation ("Bar A"), a 2500-person capacity hot spot in Belmar on the Jersey Shore, where he rose from filing paperwork in the back office to eventually running the entire operation. The owner of Bar A, Reggie Hyde, says that he was impressed early on by Chiafullo.

"You could always tell Chris was going to be a successful guy," says Hyde. "At a young age he was a very diligent worker. He possessed great motivational skills to control and monitor what was going on in the club, and could handle a ton of different personalities at once."

His experience at Bar A, and his desire to be like his father in the restaurant business, led Chiafullo to Boston University as an undergraduate, where he studied hospitality management. After a senior-year semester abroad in London, England, he graduated and took his college education back to Bar A, where he assumed the role of general manager.

“I actually ended up running Bar A before I was old enough to drink,” says Chiafullo. “I was throwing all these people out for being underage and I wasn’t even old enough to rightfully sit on a bar stool myself.”

Chiafullo fondly recalls those days at Bar A, working with his old friend and then co-manager Tom Jannerone, now a lawyer as well. (“If his ability to win cases is anything like his ability to handle belligerent drunks and attractive women, he’ll be the greatest lawyer ever,” says Jannerone.) But after a few years, a few too many barroom scrapes, and an MBA from Monmouth University, and despite his deep admiration for Reggie Hyde, he found himself wanting more.

As the manager of Bar A, Chiafullo would often be deposed about altercations that would occur at the bar.

During one particular deposition, he realized that his lawyer didn’t know enough to invoke the attorney-client privilege, so Chiafullo lodged his own privilege objection.

“At that point I said to myself, ‘if this guy can be a lawyer, I can be one for sure,’” Chiafullo recounts. Inspired by the event, he applied to and was accepted at Seton Hall Law School the following fall.

Mark Marino, a law school classmate, remembers Chiafullo for his reassuring manner, even as he focused on his work, and is particularly effusive about [Chiafullo’s law school graduation speech](#).

“Even though he wasn’t the valedictorian, he totally upstaged everyone else who spoke that day,” says Marino. “He was extremely humorous, and entirely different from the more stoic speakers. But he also had a good message for everyone, and we all left feeling proud of him.”

Chiafullo’s speech, while entertaining, dealt with some fundamentals and tenets that dictate the way he approaches the law. Lawyers, according to Chiafullo, are meant to be “wordsmiths, who propel language into action to achieve a desired result.” While keeping the mood light, his speech offered three qualities that should guide all lawyers today: honor, commitment, and

courage. Despite the law profession’s critics, Chiafullo reminded his classmates that attorneys are still defenders of the public, and for that reason, they need to represent clients with ferocity.

“Losing a fight,” Chiafullo declares, “is far, far better than cowering from one.”

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Most colleagues refer to Chiafullo’s “electric personality” as one that attracts people to him, and often makes even those who aren’t enthralled by him pay particular attention.

“He is a person’s person,” says Ron Campione, who attended Seton Hall with Chiafullo and worked with him at the Short Hills, New Jersey, firm of Budd Lerner for several years. “He is ‘Mr. Personality’ and always able to gracefully let his presence be known. He is a confident person who uses that attribute to be a very good lawyer.”

But, implicitly, Chiafullo is also “the kind of guy who will keep order in a potentially unfair fight,” and who “you want with you in the foxhole.”

Although he enjoys a certain joie de vivre, he is extremely focused when the going gets tough.

“I prefer to try charm over intimidation,” he says with a grin. “You get a lot farther with honey, and you have to learn as a lawyer – and not a nightclub manager – to control impulsive reactions. That’s not easy for me. Believe me, there’s plenty of times when I want to slap people, especially other lawyers, but I just have to keep it in check. I do, however, try to leave adversaries with a slight sense of uncertainty, where they sense that although I’m a personable guy, my attitude could also swing the other way, and that trigger is nothing to play with.”

One fellow lawyer recalled the time that Chiafullo defended a female colleague’s honor from an over-aggressive suitor during social drinks after a long day in court. Refusing to detail the fisticuffs that purportedly ensued, Chiafullo offered a terse “no comment” instead. But Marino, for one, says that this toughness is not only real, but a major asset for Chiafullo.

“He’s the kind of guy you want backing you up,” says Marino. “For him, clients are friends, and taking care of friends is personal, not just business. If he has a relationship with you, any relationship, he’ll fight for you until he’s dead.”

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After [graduating from law school](#) and clerking one year for Hon. Louis Locascio in Monmouth County Superior Court in New Jersey, Chiafullo joined the law firm of Budd Lerner (“Budd”). There he met Chelnik, a young associate, and the two became friends. Chiafullo and Chelnik were persuaded to leave Budd with a former Budd partner to form a small, upstart firm.

Shortly after its inception, the nascent law firm was gobbled up by another large New Jersey law firm. The quick jump back to big firm life ruffled Chiafullo’s feathers, especially considering that he made the risky decision to leave a larger firm for independence and autonomy in the practice of law.

After two years at the new firm, Chiafullo continued to simmer, and eventually decided that the only answer would be to open his own doors. It did not take much for Chelnik to join him soon after.

In the final week of 2004, Chiafullo decided to make moves. An earlier iteration of the Group was born in the first week of 2005; attorneys and clients who believed in and trusted Chiafullo followed along – raising some eyebrows of those at the big firm he left.

“Skeptics questioned my decision to leave by maligning my skills and experience to anyone who would listen,” Chiafullo says, “but none of them could deny my fortitude.”

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While he may occasionally flip the channels on his new television to check in on his beloved Jets or Yankees (the reality is that it will stay tuned to Bloomberg Television or Fox News), the fact that he is even installing the TV only underscores the reality that he spends an inordinate amount of time in his office.

“I’m the first one to get to work every day and the last one to leave,” he says, swiveling in the chair behind his desk. “This chair is my life.”



Chiafullo currently spends the bulk of his time in that chair pouring over material in a massive Federal case currently on interlocutory appeal. “Even the best consigliere must be ready to ‘go to the mattresses’ sometimes,” he quips, borrowing a line from *The Godfather*. Recent travel to such eclectic locales as Orlando, Tampa, Birmingham, Atlanta, Nashville, Los Angeles, San

Francisco, Palm Springs, Cleveland, Columbus, Boston, Springfield, and Washington, DC (“I should’ve purchased stock in Continental and Marriott...”) on behalf of the twenty-some-odd defendants he represents in the case is taxing, but “all in a day’s work,” claims Chiafullo. “Going the extra mile” is evidenced not only by Chiafullo’s frequent flier statement, but in the uncompromised work ethic he demonstrates on a daily basis.

“My clients know I’m a roll-up-your sleeves type,” Chiafullo remarks. “They appreciate that I don’t aspire to be a U.S. Supreme Court Justice, but that I’ll outwork my adversary, without question. I don’t care who thinks they can write a better brief

than I can, or who thinks they can try a better case than I can. No one can outwork me. It’s that simple.”

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So whether he’s working hard to meet the demands of the changing legal landscape, or playing hard to remain true to the “normal guy” that he is, Chris Chiafullo brings a rarely duplicated approach to the practice of law. This “breath of fresh air” – human, down-to-earth, and eminently capable – is the new standard for young lawyers, ever-ready to service clients needing representation par excellence into the 21st century.

Or at least until their grandchildren hire their own attorney.

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