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2021
Person
of the
Year

Antonio Romanucci
Romanucci & Blandin

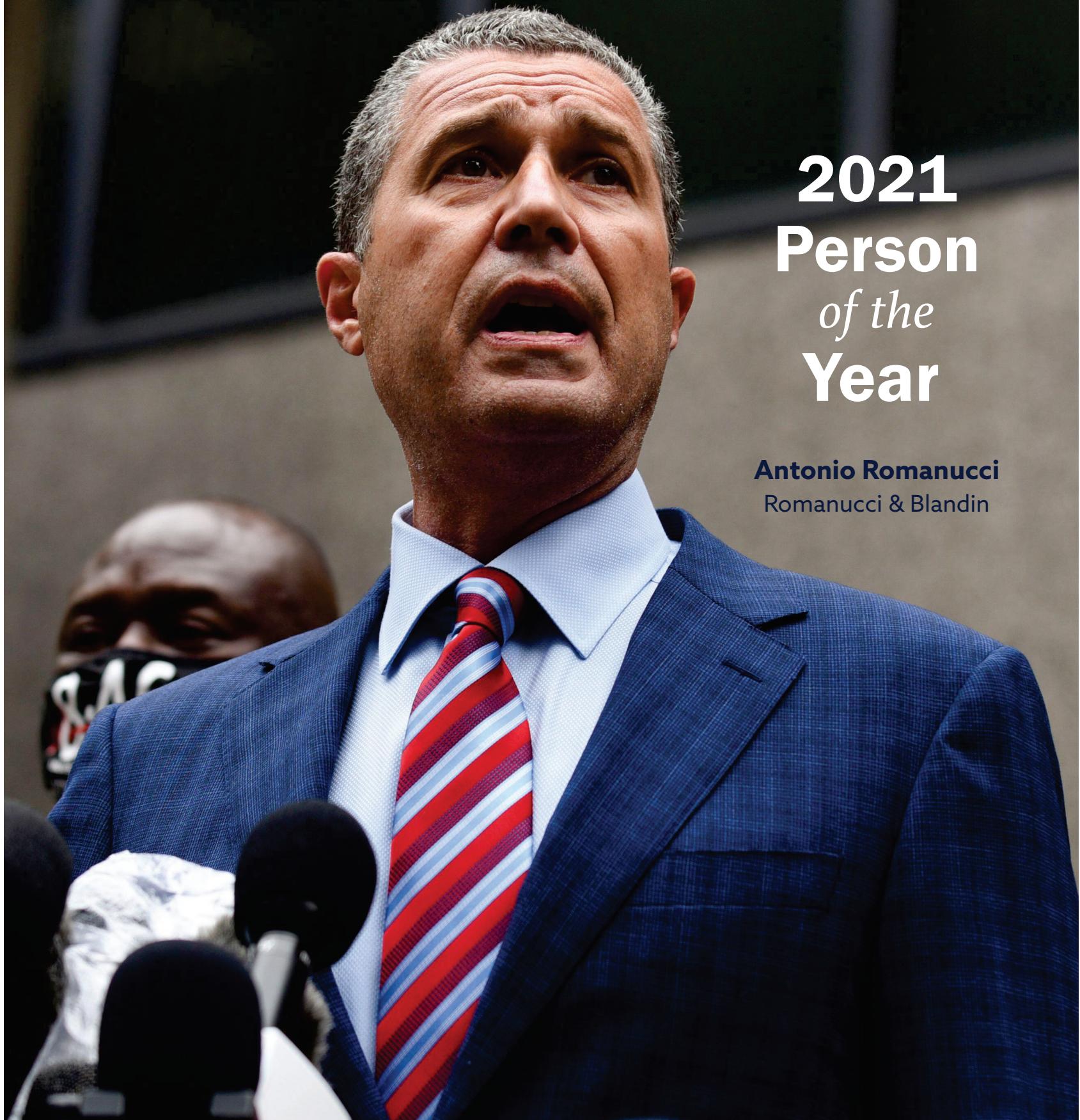




Photo by Julio Cortez/Associated Press

The Struggle Remains

Antonio Romanucci helped secure a record civil settlement for George Floyd's family. But the fight for justice continues for Chicago Lawyer's 2021 Person of the Year.

By John McNally

Antonio Romanucci doesn't get intimidated. He's gone into the heart of a conservative Florida community and won a multi-million-dollar verdict in a police shooting case. He's battling stop-and-frisk policies in the City of Chicago. He's lead counsel for high-profile cases in Illinois against Sterigenics.

Those instances were in the courtroom, a second home to Romanucci.

But, then there was the day he walked into a hotel conference room to meet approximately 60 grieving family members of George Floyd. He was nervous because he wanted to help a family shattered by the sudden, painful loss of one of their own.

It was just after Floyd's memorial service being covered live around the country and less than two weeks after Floyd's murder by Minneapolis police officer Derek Chauvin went viral and sparked anger, protests and at times vitriolic debate in every corner of the United States. Floyd family attorney Ben Crump quickly introduced his friend and gave Romanucci the floor. Romanucci wanted to be their lawyer and partner with Crump to help the family receive some closure against the city that employed the man who killed their son, their brother, their friend.

Romanucci also didn't look like them. He thought: Will they trust me?

"They knew Ben Crump, but they didn't know me. I was an unfamiliar face. I had to ingratiate myself and have them trust me pretty quick," Romanucci said. "They came to embrace me. Hug me. They didn't need to because I was not like them. I was not a marginalized person. They didn't need to, but they did. Forever, I will love them for that."

This meeting was the first of many important and challenging steps toward Romanucci and Crump securing the Floyd family what they believe is the largest pretrial civil rights settlement in a police killing in the United States — \$27 million against the City of Minneapolis. It's Romanucci's work on a case that rocked the nation, professionalism, presence in the legal community and the respect he has from his legal brethren that have earned him Chicago Lawyer's Person of the Year honor for 2021.

'THROW OUT THE PLAYBOOK'

The goosebumps always pop up when Romanucci thinks back to the day the

firm was retained by the Floyd family. "I can feel them in the back of my neck," he said during an October interview at Romanucci & Blandin's River North office.

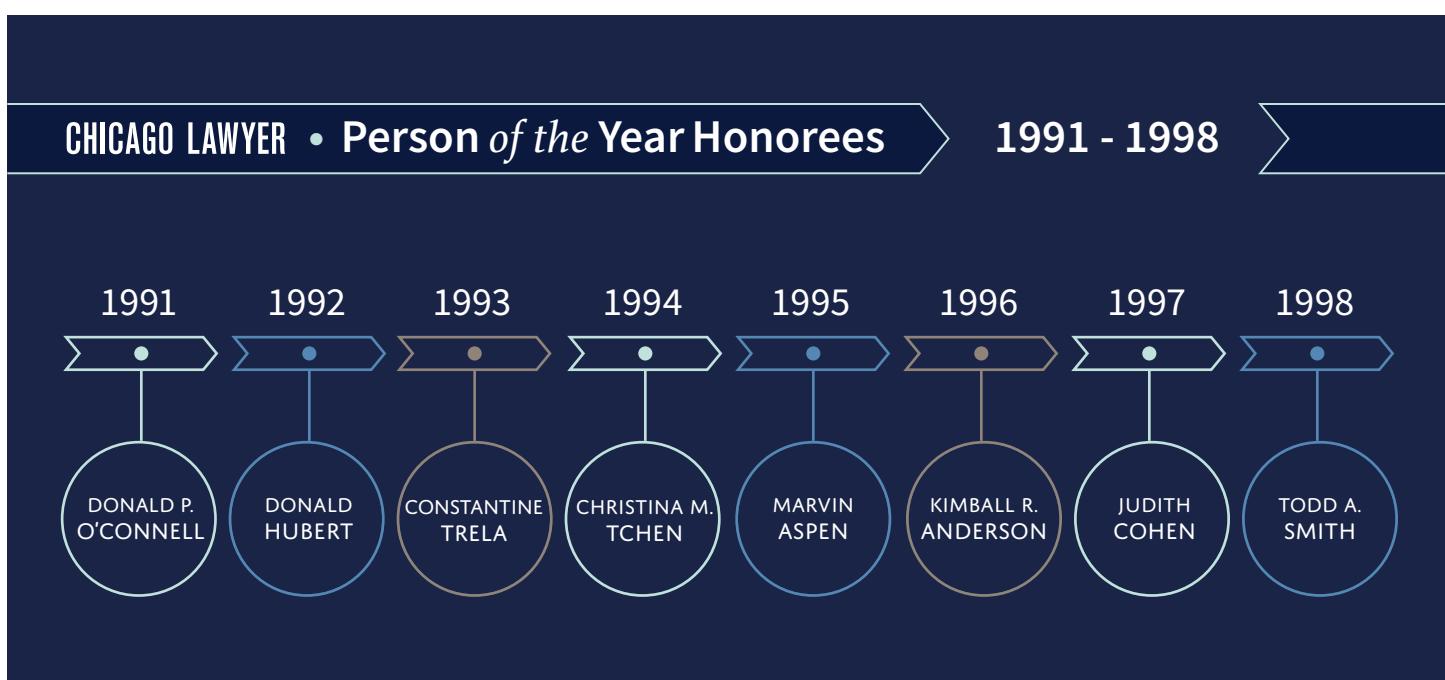
When he gave word to his staff that they were on the case, he impressed on them that this wasn't any other case. Romanucci had full faith in his team of 10 attorneys, as they had been through battles before. But this case was going to test their limits. During a global pandemic.

"My demands of them ... were the most imposing I've ever made in my career," he said. "Once I knew we were retained, the message to the team was, 'This is the civil rights case the world has never seen. And it will be treated like no other case the world has seen. Throw out the playbook. This case has no equality on how it's going to be worked up.'"

Romanucci proudly declares the team was ready to go to trial within five weeks of taking on the case. Presentations were created and deployed in settlement talks with city officials. The team secured "more than 10" experts to testify.



Antonio Romanucci and Ben Crump walk the streets of Washington D.C. in between discussing federal police reform matters with members of Congress.



"Every single base was covered," he said. "We were aggressive in our retention and finding the best police practice experts."

Then there was the edict from the Floyd family to its legal team. Romanucci said they were united in not agreeing to a settlement unless it was a "ground-breaking" amount that made other municipalities "take pause" if it let its officers go untrained and kill other people.

"There's no doubt that the resolution, the settlement and the finality was the optimal outcome" for the Floyd family, Romanucci said. "I know for the lawyers it was a difficult mental game to discuss finality on a case where we felt so confident. I think we knew, based upon a lot of research and studying, and a lot of behind-the-scenes work across the country on that research. We had extreme confidence we would succeed."

CREATING A PARTNERSHIP

Romanucci recalls feeling as if he were encroaching on Crump's territory — with the latter having an office in Tallahassee, Florida — when he took and saw the Joshua Salvato police excessive deadly case to a verdict in Ocala, Florida. Even so, when he needed an affidavit on attorney's fees for that case, he felt Crump was the ideal person to utilize. And Crump was impressed with Romanucci's ability to break through and secure a win for his client.

"I was astonished by what Tony was able to achieve in Ocala, which is not known for being very progressive," Crump said.

The pair immediately started discussing the big topics and ideas they share in common, with one at the forefront: making America live up to its promise for all its citizens.

"It was mutual respect from day one. We talked about the challenges and the struggles of trying to fight against a biased legal system," Crump recalled. "We talked about the fact that we have to continue to use all our resources to make the world a better place."

"We agreed that whenever we get a chance to (combine) our resources that we would do it."

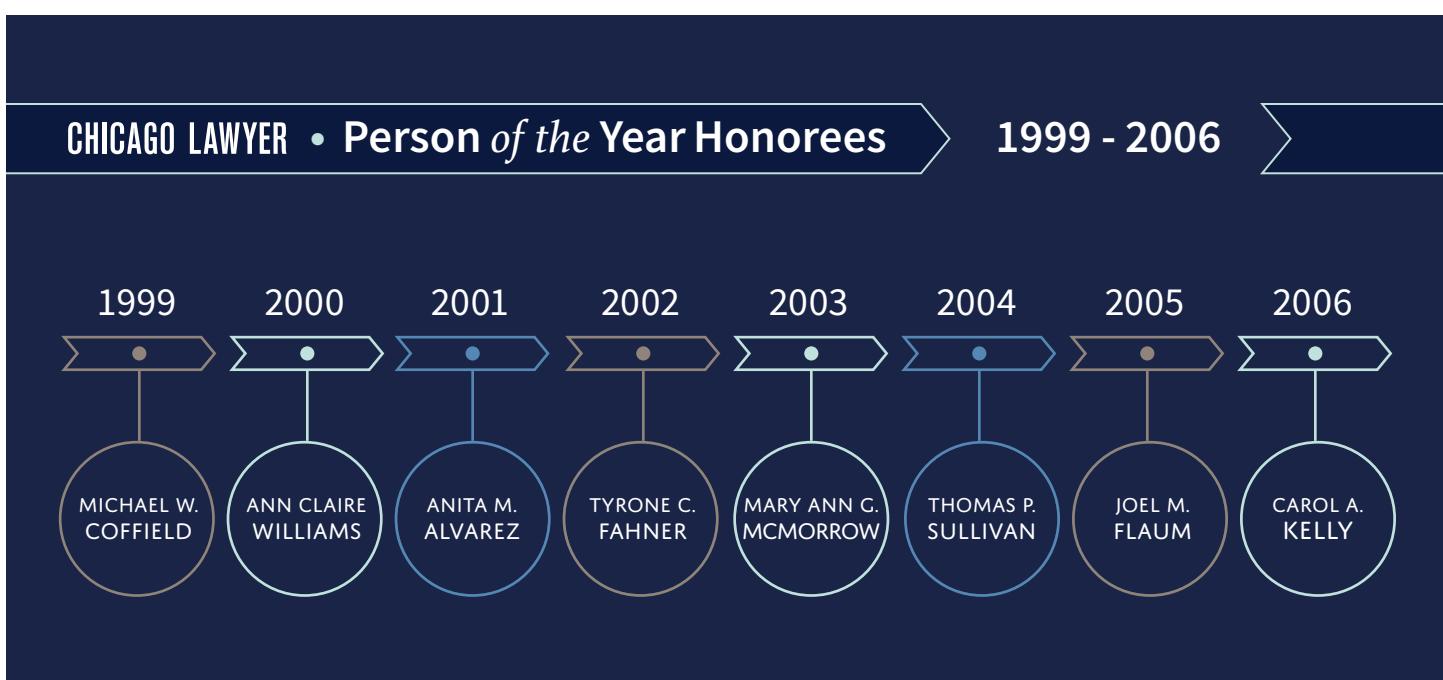
The Floyd civil case against the City of Minneapolis is the highest-profile case to date by the duo. Romanucci's passion for the work and his clients will



Romanucci holds a press conference in North Carolina over the November 2020 police shooting death of 18-year-old Fred Cox.

always shine through, according to Crump. He also has no concerns about Romanucci making a bad first impression when he sets up an initial meeting with a client.

"The one thing I can say unequivocally is not only (is) Tony Romanucci one of the best lawyers in America, he's also one of the most passionate people I've ever met. And he's one of the best human beings I've ever met," Crump said. "So, when we go in to meet George Floyd's family and other families, I know that Tony's conviction for justice and equality will show through no matter what family we're meeting. Whether it's a white family, Black family,



or Hispanic family, his humanity exudes when he interacts with people."

Romanucci said that he and Crump get together about twice a month in the aftermath of the Floyd settlement, mostly for speaking engagements about civil rights and police reform. The duo completed a white paper ("A Model Approach to Comprehensive Police Reform") and has taken it on a national speaking tour to bar groups, legal organizations and law schools. Romanucci loves hitting law school campuses to "empower and challenge" the students to take advantage of an opportunity to make change if they are willing.

Romanucci said the white paper was developed in part because they anticipated — correctly — that they would not achieve police reforms at the federal level after Floyd's murder.

"In the Floyd case, we didn't take a deposition, we didn't go to trial. There isn't much to teach on a litigation level," Romanucci said. "But there is a lot to teach about what happened, how we got to that result, how we got this case to a certain level through messaging, and the behind-the-scenes work with focus groups, mock trials ... which got us to that record settlement."

FINDING HIS FOOTING

Romanucci's passion for civil rights cases started when he was a 2L student at UIC John Marshall in 1985. He was trying cases at the misdemeanor jury trial courtroom at 13th and Michigan Ave. It just so happened that he worked a ton of those cases in a judge's courtroom who was starting to blaze her own path that would lead her to the state's high court — now-Justice Mary Jane Theis.

Romanucci says Theis was incredibly helpful to him as a young public defender. She also pushed him to be better.

"She saw something in me...that maybe I could be a good lawyer one day," he said. "She forced me to trial on many cases. One of the greatest lessons that I learned from Justice Theis was to not be afraid. When she saw the opportunity for a case that required a trial, she encouraged it. And the supervising lawyers I was working with let me do them."

Theis vividly recalls watching Romanucci in her court for that year and was struck as to how he was already a strong lawyer at such a young age.

"He was aware of his maturity. He had a great sense of the dynamics in the courtroom, decisions being made, the value of the process," she said. "He stood out from other lawyers with that maturity."

Romanucci's professionalism, Theis said, was one of the many reasons her first administrative action after her 2012 election to the Illinois Supreme Court was to appoint him to the high court's Rules Committee. He served from 2012-20, serving that final year as chair of the committee. Theis knew Romanucci had the ideal temperament to take on such an important position.

"They're adopting the rules that will impact the practice of law and the litigants that come into the courtroom," she said. "(I wanted) someone who could see those big-picture ideas and not be concerned about their own practice or what a rule would mean to them and their clients — to be able to see the profession and the legal system in a big, broad way. My first thought was Tony Romanucci. I had seen that he had all those qualities from when I first met him."

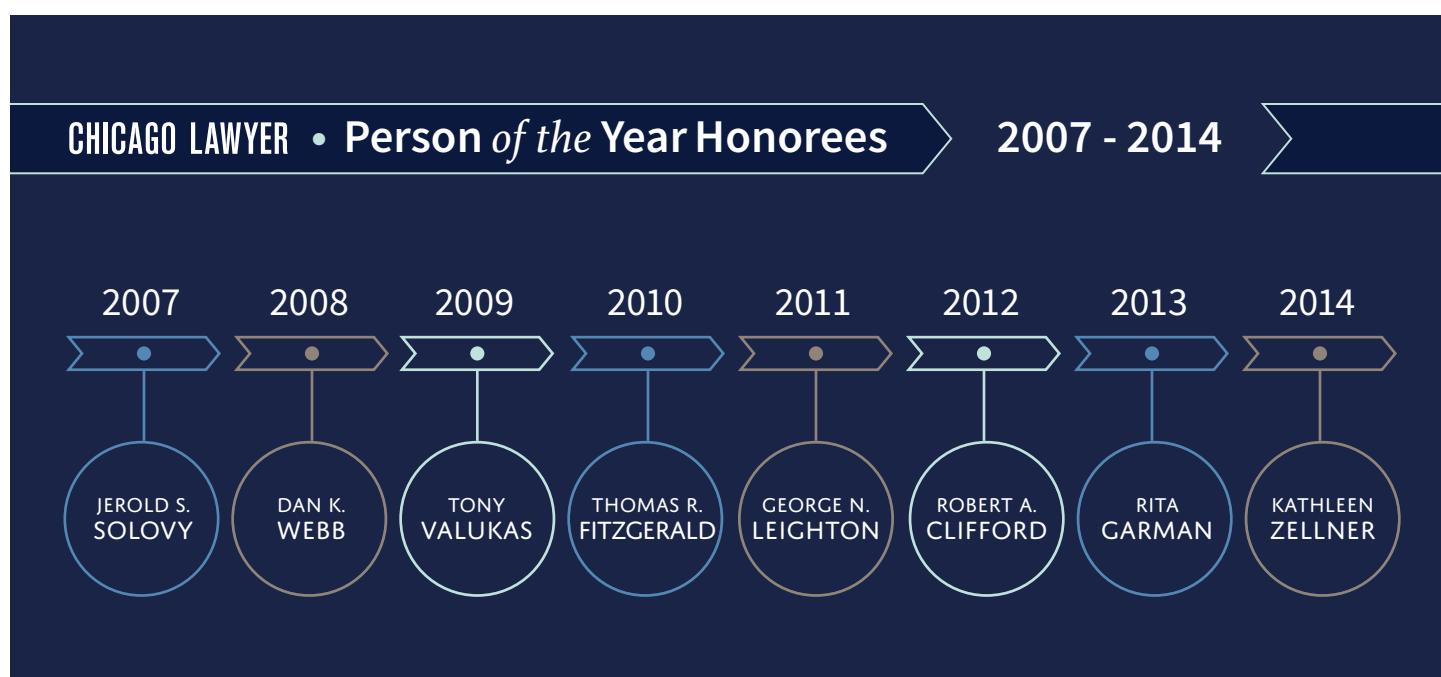
HUMBLE BEGINNINGS

Stephan Blandin, fellow founding partner of Romanucci & Blandin, said one year of working together at a different firm 25 years ago was enough for the two to make impressions on one another.

"Right about the time I was thinking of starting my own firm, he was thinking the same thing," Blandin said. "The first person I thought of was Tony, and the first person he thought of was me."

They each left messages for one another to meet for lunch, neither wise to fact they were going to propose partnership to the other. After the initial surprise wore off, the pair began to discuss the business details. A couple of weeks later, over lunch at The Palace Grill right by the United Center, those details were put down on a napkin of their mutual friend, according to Blandin.

Blandin says the pair's "good cop/bad cop" mentality — Romanucci being



the more personable, Blandin with an admittedly more gruff attitude — has been beneficial to a firm that started by taking on cases that came through the door that has grown to be a major part of the legal infrastructure of Chicago, the state of Illinois and now the country.

"He and I are very different. What I'm not good at, he's good at, and I like to think I complement him," he said.

Blandin added: "That's a testament to Tony's networking."

Romanucci appreciates that he and Blandin are grinding every day at the firm and seeing how the pair's team continually rises to the occasion.

"I'm not a ghost partner; neither is Stephan," he said. "We go to court and fight for our clients."

WORK TO BE DONE

Crump believes his dear friend could make a huge difference in Washington, D.C. He thinks Romanucci would look great in the House of Representatives representing his beloved Chicago.

Romanucci admits he's been approached, prodded and implored to run for political office. But he can't give up the grind of working a case. He'd miss it too much. Romanucci tells his firm colleagues coming into the office is the best part of his day.

"I'm a one-trick pony. I don't know what I would do without this job, coming here every day," he said.

"I think I'd be lost."

There's also so much work on the horizon. Romanucci remains the court-appointed lead counsel in the ongoing cases against Sterigenics. The company is accused in lawsuits, among other parties, of causing illnesses such as leukemia, lymphoma, breast cancer, miscarriages and other medical maladies. Romanucci says the next two years could bring as many as 10 trials for himself and his team.

"The next five years are going to be the busiest of my career," he said. "We have a lot of litigation pending in this firm. I intend to be very active in those (cases)."

And Romanucci won't stop pushing on the civil rights and police reform

changes — including ending qualified immunity and forced arbitration — that he, Crump and a litany of U.S. citizens want enacted.

Romanucci believes very few of those societal goals were accomplished with the \$27 million settlement, except for the police reforms the State of Minnesota enacted. Romanucci is going to fight for more.

"I can say that I have not reset from the Floyd case," he said. "In my mind, this is an ongoing case. It's not over, even though it's over."

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Romanucci admits he has a tough time resetting after a case, but he says hiking is what helps him find his balance.

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