

REFLECTIONS ON REPRESENTING SENIOR CITIZENS

As I start my first year as your President, I find myself reflecting on what it is that we do for a living and why it is so important for those we represent. Sometimes we wonder if what we do really matters. The loss of a loved one due to someone's negligence. A serious injury that has forever changed someone's life. Many of our clients begin an endless search for accountability, justice and closure.

Recently, I ran across one of the most powerful stories of the year in the *Los Angeles Times* about Clara and Joseph Gantt titled "Missing POW's Remains Returned to his Widow 63 Years After His Death". *Los Angeles Times*, December 13, 2013.

This was the story of Army Sergeant First Class Joseph Gantt, who told his wife before he went off to World War II that if he didn't come back, she should re-marry. She told him "no" and that he was it for her for life. For 63 years, the WWII and Korean War Veteran was missing in action and was presumed dead, but Clara Gantt, now age 94, held out hope and never re-married.

Apparently, Sgt. Gantt had been taken prisoner by North Korean forces in December 1950 and died in March 1951. However, his remains were only recently returned to the U.S. and identified for his spouse.

Last December, in a cold, dark morning at Los Angeles International Airport, his remains were returned in a flag draped casket to his widow, Clara, who stood from her wheelchair, and cried a lifetime of tears upon his return. Apparently, she told reporters at the airport "I always did love my husband, we was one of a kind, we loved each other, and that made our marriage complete."

Amazingly, Clara Gantt was able to sum up the essence of loss between two people in three sentences. In the end, isn't it that love between two people that makes life unique and special?

I have had the honor of representing senior citizens over the years. I can vividly remember numerous defense counsel saying to me (off the record), "hey the guy only had a little time left anyway. What is this case really worth?" When you encounter that response, be sure and remember to read the story about Clara and Joseph Gantt.

Never shy away from the opportunity to represent a member of the greatest generation. They deserve it and you will cherish the honor and privilege to have made a difference in their lives.

This past Christmas season, I spent time with my mother and father-in-law in the small, Midwestern town of Galena, Illinois. The town is most well known as the eventual home of the Ulysses S. Grant. When we arrived from Southern California to Chicago's O'Hare Airport on December 23, the pilot got on the PA system and announced in a somewhat sarcastic voice that it was 7° and that "you were no longer in Los Angeles." My kids, who have grown up in California, but are now both attending college out-of-state in Oregon and New Jersey have experienced some cold weather, but never 7°. By the time we made the three-hour drive west through the beautiful cornfields of Illinois, it was down to -4° when we rolled into Galena. The weather report for the next few days was for cold and it might get down to -11°. The next morning, I woke up early on December 24th, Christmas Eve, and I checked my I-phone weather icon, and to my amazement, it was -20° and then, to my further amazement, the phone said, but with the wind chill, it feels like -33°. I quickly grabbed a cup of coffee

and went outside to check it out. I could only take a few short breaths and had to come back inside. By mid-morning, the sun had warmed it up to 9° or 10° below zero. At about the same time back in Los Angeles, it was 80°!

But, the real reason we braved the elements coming from Southern California was to see my mother-in-law who had been diagnosed with an advanced stage of Alzheimer's and was now in a secured senior home in East Dubuque, Illinois. Her husband, of some 57 years, had tried his best to take care of her for the last three or four years but finally had to check her into a secured facility after she started wandering out of the house in the middle of the night. My wife and I, along with our two kids, got to witness first-hand the difference a loving spouse makes in a person's life. This is true, even when the spouse no longer really knows for sure who the other one is. We were able to be with her at Christmas Eve dinner and go to church with her on Christmas Eve. Even though it was obvious she could not remember most of the Christmas songs that she had sung her whole life, she appeared to enjoy every moment of the evening. Then we had to take her back to a lock-down senior living house that was not really her home in order for her to be safe. Very sad!

In the ensuing days, we would visit the facility which had a number of senior citizens who would be allowed to congregate in a social setting in the lobby of the old school house that had now been converted into a senior living facility. On our last day, I looked over at my daughter who was sitting next to her grandmother on the couch and she had observed the numerous people in wheelchairs with various levels of dementia and various other old-age health issues. I saw her starting to cry and generally start to lose it. I didn't have to ask her if she was o.k., because I knew she wasn't. We left a short time later and no one really said anything in the car. Finally, she blurted out and said "is that it?" "We spend our whole life struggling and working and trying to do the best we can so that we can end up in a senior home and sit around and wait to die?"

I tried to give her a rational, comforting response like "well, she has friends there and they have a social interaction with each other," but think about it – what is it that makes our lives worth living? It isn't money or material things. In the end, it is the friendships and relationships we form each day and renew every day over time. Our profession is unique because it is about helping people find justice and accountability for the loss that they have suffered in their lives. But, don't forget about the friendships that we make along the way with our clients, the opposing lawyers, the witnesses, the judges, the court staff and all the people that are part of this profession that we call the civil justice system. Don't forget to reach out and enjoy each day of the journey because it won't last forever. My advice, make an impact on someone's life while you are here working for justice every day.