

A tribute by NYSDA Board of Directors member, Andy Correia

If you ever went to a NYSDA training, you probably saw Charlie O'Brien. He was the big, tall guy with the dark hair and a thick moustache, standing in the back of the room in his dark blue suit. You might not know who he was because Charlie never made a big deal out of himself. He was never in front of the mic. Hardly ever in front of a camera. I did a google image search for "Charlie O'Brien NYSDA" and came up with about three pictures of him. The shots were mostly of him quietly doing his job or standing in the back of a big group of people.

Charlie did not want or need to be noticed. But now that he has died (I would say "passed on" or "left us", but I don't think Charlie would appreciate that. Call it what it is.) I don't want his importance in the world of New York criminal defense to be overlooked.

Charlie was the guy who would reach out to you directly for one of a short list of reasons: he found out that you had some information, knowledge or experience worth sharing and he wanted you to stand in front of a mic and a camera and give that information to other defense lawyers, he heard you had a problem and he wanted to learn about it or he had a solution for your problem and he wanted to tell you about it. I knew when Charlie called I needed to take that call.

Charlie was not impressed by the big events of the day when fundamental known flaws remained in our ability to represent our clients. He kept it simple. For example, around the time he reluctantly took over as Executive Director of NYSDA, I was remotely watching the big ILS unveiling of the new Eligibility Standards. In the midst of that reveal, I saw and heard Charlie stand up and point out that (and I'm paraphrasing here) "this is all great and everything, but there's a lot of places around the state where lawyers still can't get their clients' rap sheets." He didn't want attention, but when something needed to be said, he didn't care about raining on someone else's parade. Someone needed to point out the obvious, and keep pointing it out. That was something Charlie would do.

He was the kind of guy you wanted to sit next to at the banquet table where you didn't know anyone. He would talk a bit, and always laugh that deep honest laugh of his, but mostly he would ask questions and listen and think. I don't think he enjoyed the social aspects of those dinners that much, but he was always warm and friendly and ready to learn about your problems.

If you wanted to get Charlie talking, though, you just had to ask him about his family. I hardly know any of his family personally, but I feel like I know all about them from hearing Charlie talk about them over the years. Once, when I was working in Syracuse, one of his daughters got some modeling photos into a regional Syracuse magazine. He called me and asked me to run around and find multiple copies of that magazine for him. I was more than happy to. I knew how important it was for him to celebrate his daughter's accomplishments. I'm sure he gathered up all the copies he could and sent them out to friends and family.

Charlie was always in the background, quietly working to make things better for our clients and for criminal defense lawyers. He was the yin to Jonathan Gradess' yang at NYSDA for years and years. I can only imagine the internal debates that occurred when Charlie thought he was right about something. Charlie was no pushover. But you never, ever saw any friction in public. Because Charlie was about the work, regardless of how many people recognized his face.

There are many lessons to be learned by how Charlie lived his professional and personal life. Zealousness and persistence, tempered by kindness and empathy. Humility. Putting your ego in a box for the greater good. A functioning moral compass. A willingness to speak the simple truths that are lost in the bluster and excitement of massive reforms. A boundless love and loyalty for family. Now more than ever, we could all learn from Charlie.

What I know now, however, is that I will miss seeing him in the back of the big rooms, quietly watching over all of us.

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