

In Profile

Joe Cassilly

JOE CASSILLY HAS BEEN A FAMILIAR FIGURE at NDAA conferences for years. He served as the association's treasurer before becoming president at the NDAA Summer Conference in July. He's usually the only person in the room in a wheel chair. He's a paraplegic.

His injury was caused by the turbulence from the rotors of a Huey helicopter. On October 17, 1970, when Cassilly was an army Ranger in Vietnam, he and his unit had completed a mission and he was climbing up a rope ladder onto the helicopter—with a machine gun and ammunition strapped to his back—when a downdraft caused by the whirring rotors literally blew him off the ladder and onto the ground. He landed on his back and on the machine gun, causing a fracture of his seventh cervical vertebra and paralysis in both legs.

Now in his sixth term as state's attorney of Harford County, Maryland, which straddles the busy I-95 corridor between Philadelphia to the north and Baltimore and Washington, DC, to the south, Cassilly, 58, oversees 29 attorneys and 42 support staff. His jurisdiction (population, approximately 250,000) is essentially a bedroom community for residents who work in one of the large cities nearby, as well as the home of two large army installations: the Aberdeen Proving Grounds and the Edgewood Arsenal.

As with most prosecutors, Cassilly says much of the crime his office deals with is drug related and involves all economic levels. What he had not expected was the growing influx of gangs. "You go to NDAA meetings," he said, "and hear prosecutors from the big cities talking about their gang problems and you feel sort of safe from that, thinking, 'I don't live in a big city, so I guess I won't have a gang problem.' And then you realize that you do have a gang problem, because gangs are looking for new territories and yours appears to be available."

Cassilly, a native of his jurisdiction, is a textbook example of a community prosecutor. "There's an advantage to being an elected prosecutor," he says, "because you need to be out with the people. You can't isolate yourself and sit in your office and wait for problems to come and find you. You have to go out



there and identify what's of concern to the people in your county, which means going to the local boys' and girls' clubs and wherever there are issues. I'm the community prosecutor here, which means I'm the person who needs to spend some of my time out in the community while my deputies and assistants are in the courtroom. I need to be out talking to people, finding out what's troubling them, what they need help with, what we need to focus on and what resources we need to make sure that I'm solving problems, and that I'm going to get re-elected. People will feel that 'He's in touch with us. He knows what we need. We want this guy to continue in office.'"

Joe Cassilly's road to the state's attorney's office in Bel Air, the Harford County seat, began in a hospital bed in a Veterans Administration hospital in Richmond, Virginia, in 1971, where he lay recovering from his war injury and contemplating his future. Realizing that he could not achieve his goal of becoming a police officer, but wanting to work in law enforcement, he chose prosecution.

Since he had joined the army immediately after graduation from high school, he needed a college education and there was no time to spare. It was January and the VA doctors told him he would be there for at least a year. But he discharged himself in May and attended a community college. Then he headed for the University of Arizona, where he earned a bachelor's degree, followed by a law degree from the University of Baltimore in 1976, and admission to the Maryland bar the following June. His first job was teaching law. A job as an assistant state's attorney of Harford County ended in July 1982 when his boss fired him after Cassilly announced that he was going to run for his boss's job.

Being paralyzed from the waist down with only partial use of his arms and hands and confined to a wheel chair did not prevent Cassilly from waging an aggressive election campaign. His dining room table was his campaign headquarters and he soon became a familiar sight throughout his county, wheeling into shopping centers and factories, talking to workers and sit-

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WHEREAS the National District Attorneys Association (NDAA) supports drug courts and similar rehabilitation programs which offer rehabilitation through treatment and meaningful sanctions; and

WHEREAS the NDAA agrees with the National Association of Drug Court Professionals that laws which deprive judges of the ability to sanction offenders who commit repeat violations are bad public policy; and

WHEREAS efforts are being made by special interest groups that seek the legalization of drugs such as the so-called "Non Violent Offender Rehabilitation Act" in California that might more accurately be titled the "No Rehabilitation or Accountability Act"; and

WHEREAS the NDAA opposes laws that forbid judges from sanctioning defendants who continue to abuse drugs and violate the terms of their probation or treatment plans; and

WHEREAS proponents of such legislation would allow repeat felons with as many as six convictions to avoid meaningful sanctions and accountability; and

WHEREAS effective rehabilitation programs balance treatment options with accountability to prevent further crime and victimization.

THEREFORE BE IT RESOLVED THAT the NDAA supports those drug courts and similar rehabilitation programs that effectively balance treatment options with accountability and prevent further crime and victimization.

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ting by roadsides, waving to motorists. He was campaigning 10 to 12 hours a day because, he says, "People wanted to see the candidates out there. If I could survive in the campaign (it would show) I could do the job." He survived and won.

He does not have to campaign that way any more. "Once you're elected and have the power of incumbency," he explains, "you're really campaigning all the time, but in a different way. You're out there the entire four years between elections, going to community organizations, citizens' forums, talking to seniors' groups, listening to the people, talking about problems, and explaining what you're doing about them. So it's different from when you're the challenger and you are trying to get people to listen to you in the first place."

Asked what he does for relaxation, Cassilly replied, "We (he and his wife Diana) have five children (ranging in age from a 33-year-old daughter to a 21-year-old son), so I'm involved with them. Plus we have our first granddaughter, five years old, and we see her as often as we can."

Cassilly has been active in local theater productions. In 1977, he had a singing role in the musical "Oliver," and a reviewer noted that Cassilly is "endowed with a fine voice." In 1986, he played the role of H. L. Mencken, Baltimore's legendary curmudgeon and chronicler, in "Inherit the Wind." He also plays the hammered dulcimer—"alone," because, he confesses, "playing before people makes me nervous," although this career prosecutor is fearless in a courtroom. He is also involved in issues for the disabled, serving on design teams for Baltimore's sports stadiums and other large projects.

He adds, "Being involved with NDAA has been very useful, but it's also very enjoyable. We have great meetings and you meet a lot of interesting people you wouldn't have a chance to

meet anywhere else."

Joe Cassilly does not think in terms of handicaps. He thinks in terms of advantages.

For example, "One of the things it's good to be, if you're a prosecutor like me," he says, "is a native. I grew up in Harford County. I went to grade school and high school here. My family has always lived here. When people asked me how I got elected, I told them it was the 'cousin factor.' I come from a very large family. I'm the oldest of 11 children, and I have lots of cousins and other relatives. So if you start with the people I went to school with and the people that my 10 brothers and sisters went to school with, and then take our cousins and the people they went to school with, and add my other relatives and the people that they know, you're talking about a good chunk of the population. And they all vote."

As for the future, Joe Cassilly is taking it one election at a time. His current term ends in 2010 and he says, "I intend to go for it. I haven't thought about doing anything that I like to do as much as what I'm doing."

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