

Gerard V. Mantese

Mantese and Rossman, P.C., Troy

Practice specialty: Business litigation

Law school: St. Louis University, 1982

Gerard Mantese could have settled for putting in a few pro bono hours when a friend asked him to help battered women by volunteering for First Step, a Plymouth-based group dedicated to social justice.

But he didn't stop there.

After he joined the First Step board, Mantese created a new legal arm called the First Step Legal Advocacy Project that trains volunteer attorneys to handle the specific needs of victims of domestic violence.

First Step's stable of legal volunteers files personal protection orders, handles divorce, child-custody and property disputes between the accuser and accused, basically streamlining into one complete package the legal work needed for a fresh start.

The training model Mantese created is so valuable that similar groups across the state now use it.

"You feel grateful when you can make a greater impact, when you help people who are shut out from the legal system stop feeling like they're at the mercy of those who would subjugate them," Mantese said.

Mantese got involved in the anti-violence effort in 1992 at the urging of friends Judy Ellis and Kelly Machado, who was then president of First Step.

Mantese helped clients directly, spending hundreds of uncompensated hours and personally recruiting 50 attorneys to run a legal clinic for women too poor to hire their own representation.

"It really was a way to empower people," Mantese said.

In the last few years, Mantese transitioned from direct involvement with First Step clients to fundraising for a \$5.5 million family center planned for the city of Wayne, a place where victims can escape from violence and everyone can take classes to learn about healthy relationships.

"We're in the beginning stages of it," said Theresa Bizoe, associate director of First Step. "Gerard has been integral with hosting parlor meetings where you invite people in to tell stories about First Step. The fact that he invites friends and family and colleagues into his home to help is so valuable."

When he's not volunteering, Mantese practices law at the seven-person firm he founded in Southfield.

Most notably, he was lead counsel on *Altria Group, Inc., v. Good*, a consumer-fraud case against big tobacco that ended up before the U.S. Supreme Court.

Mantese filed the case against Altria Group and Philip Morris in Maine about four years ago with a complaint alleging the defendants wrongfully marketed Marlboro Lights as containing "lowered tar and nicotine."

Mantese personally argued the case at trial court and worked on the brief filed in the U.S. Supreme Court.

He won a 5-4 decision in December 2008, when the Supreme Court ruled tobacco companies were subject to consumer fraud claims and said the federal government had not pre-empted state fraud laws.

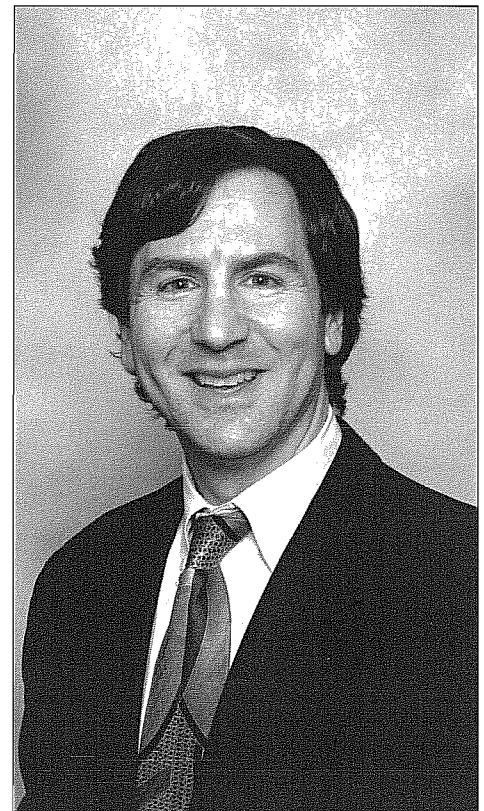
"It was exhilarating," Mantese said, adding that associates painstakingly reviewed every sentence before the briefs were sent to the Supreme Court.

The people he worked with on that case and others at Mantese and Rossman are carefully recruited to the firm not on the basis of experience, but on the grounds of willingness to learn and desire to give back.

"I'm looking for people who have a desire to do a great job, people who have enthusiasm and energy," Mantese said. "If they have that, they're going to do whatever it takes to learn to be a great attorney. If they care about their clients, the teaching part is easy."

Mantese mentored students as an adjunct professor at Wayne State University School of Law while teaching pre-trial procedure for six years.

He said he encourages his new attorneys to author scholarly articles. He also gets them into the courtroom quickly where they



What time in the morning do you first check email?

"I would say 8:30. ... It's the second thing I do. First thing I do is talk to attorneys in the firm."

argue motions and assist in trying cases.

He continues to mentor a new generation of local legal experts by regularly sitting down with associates to discuss cases and opportunities for community involvement.

"I've told my attorneys if they see pro bono opportunities to bring them to me," Mantese said. "I'm very supportive of those kinds of efforts."

— CHRISTY STRAWSER