

# Lunch with Legends: Trailblazers, Trendsetters and Treasures of the Rhode Island Bar



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Gerald C. DeMaria was born in Providence, Rhode Island on May 5, 1942. He grew up in Smith Hill, where his father owned and operated LaSalle Bakery. Mr. DeMaria graduated from LaSalle Academy in 1960, and Providence College, where he majored in Political Science, in 1964. Upon graduation, he was commissioned as an officer in the United States Army, and deferred active duty while he attended Suffolk University Law School. Mr. DeMaria graduated from law school in 1967, gained admission to the Bar in the fall of 1967, and began his military service in January of 1968. He was stationed, among other places, in Korat, Thailand, where he tried criminal cases until the completion of his service in January 1970. Mr. DeMaria returned to Rhode Island to practice at Higgins, Cavanagh, & Cooney, alongside his initial mentors, Joseph Cavanagh, Sr. and Ken Borden. He also counts legendary lawyer, Joe Kelly, among his mentors, and deems him “the chronicler of the common law.” Forty-four years later, Mr. DeMaria still practices at Higgins, Cavanagh, & Cooney, and he is considered by many as one of the state’s most accomplished trial attorneys in the product liability arena. Excerpts from my conversation with this longstanding Rhode Island Bar veteran follow.



Gerald C. DeMaria

**What has been your most memorable experience over the course of your legal career?** All things considered, it was being a lawyer in the lead paint case, the lead paint public nuisance case the Attorney General brought against six lead pigment manufacturers, which lasted ten years and entailed two trials, ultimately resulting in the Supreme Court rendering a decision for the defendants ten years after the start of the lawsuit. It was about ten years of a real hard-fought litigation. My client was Glidden Paint Manufacturing. I was trial counsel with them here in Rhode Island.

**Over the course of your legal career, who has been your most formidable opponent?** My most formidable opponents have been Len Decof and his son, Mark, both of whom are also dear friends, but very formidable.

**What was your biggest challenge over the course of your legal profession?** Balancing a family with the obligations you have as a lawyer to your client, to devote that amount of time, no matter how much and no matter at what time during the week or year, the obligation to the client for that particular period of time must come first.

**What skills or qualities do you attribute to some of your successes in your legal career?** Bull work only. Just hard work. There’s nothing but constant professional labor in knowing and mastering your facts and knowing and applying the law. In connection with knowing and applying the law, I’ve always considered myself a constant student of the law, so I read the law constantly, even up to this day. So you have to read the law to know the latest law in an area, and then do your work in connection with knowing and mastering the facts.

**What has been the single biggest change in the legal profession since you started practicing?** The greater role that arbitration and, more than that, mediation of cases now play in the two systems we have here, state and federal. I see mediation is now the rule rather than the exception, even more than arbitration. Those cases that may be sent to arbitration by a court often result in the process of mediation. And many times mediation assists in the resolution of a matter.

**What challenges do you foresee for newer members of the bar?** I think it’s economic. The economic pressures put on new lawyers are almost intolerable. The competition among lawyers today is staggering, evidenced by the necessity they feel for public advertising and things of that nature. Because of the number of lawyers and the small state we are in, both geographically and demographically in terms of the numbers of people we have in the state, for a young lawyer to come out today and remain honest and faithful to the work that he or she has to do in the best interest of the client, the economic challenges and the business aspect of the law sometimes overpowers them.

**Would you do it all over again?** I’m a fool. I would probably do it over again.

Indeed, this author hopes you would, as your contributions to the bar are immeasurable. Thank you, Mr. DeMaria, for all you have done.