Supporting a new generation

Cafaro gives $4M to U. of C. law school to fund 22 full, three-year scholarships

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A graduate of the University of Chicago Law School who was the first person in her family to go to college has given $4 million to the school for scholarships.

The gift from Debra A. Cafaro, chairman and chief executive officer of Chicago-based Ventas Inc., will provide full-tuition, three-year scholarships to 22 students over nine years, the school announced this week.

Cafaro, 55, whose father was a postman and mother was a homemaker, said she made her gift "to give other students the opportunity that I had and to show my gratitude to the law school for what they did for me."

Cafaro came from a working-class neighborhood in Pittsburgh. Both her parents were the children of immigrants.

"I would characterize my parents as very intelligent, but not college-educated," she said, noting her mother, Dee, was valedictorian of her high school class.

"When my father was a mailman, he was also very good with numbers," Cafaro said.

Her father, Frank, took an interest in coins and discovered that a silver dollar he received in normal circulation was worth $25.

So he would take his paycheck to the bank to cash it and ask to be paid in silver dollars.

"We would look through them to find the rare ones," Cafaro said. Her father "had a great memory for which of the coins were worth more."

Dealing in rare coins became his second job. Then, when Cafaro was a teenager, her father "quit the post office and had a coin shop in downtown Pittsburgh."

As for why she decided to become a lawyer, Cafaro said the Watergate scandal in Washington, D.C., took place while she was in high school.

And "all of the cool people" investigating the scandal "were either lawyers or journalists," she said.

With sacrifice, her parents were able to send her to the University of Notre Dame, where she majored in government.

She applied to several law schools, including the University of Chicago Law School. She was interested in the city of Chicago and the law school’s reputation for "really powerful idea-generation." It had "so much intellectual firepower."

The law school, Cafaro said, completely transformed her.

"It was the first place I was (at) that it was really cool to be smart," she said. "It really gave me confidence and what I call a tool kit for approaching problems and for really solving problems."

After clerking for a federal appellate judge, Cafaro became the only associate at and a founding member of the law firm of Barack Ferrazzano, Kirschenbaum & Nagelberg LLP in 1984.

Thirteen years later, through her clients, she got an opportunity to "jump over to the business side" when she became president of Ambassador Apartments Inc., a real estate investment trust (REIT).

She said law school had given her confidence that she could do well in new fields.

In 1999, she became chief executive officer of a different company, which the University of Chicago press release describes as then a "deeply troubled, healthcare real estate investment trust."

Under her leadership, the market capitalization of that company, Ventas, at 353 N. Clark St., has jumped from $200 million in 1999 to more than $2 billion in 2012.

"She is widely recognized as one of the most successful REIT CEOs," said David J. Neiercut, president and chief executive officer of Equity Residential, another REIT. "Her track record since she took over is really without peer."

Cafaro "is smart, she is tenacious — she’s also nice," Neiercut said. "She has been a trusted kind of go-to adviser for me for many years."

In today’s world, Cafaro said, it is harder for her background to attend a top law school.

"There is increasing economic disparity in this country," she said. "I think one of the greatest things about the United States has always been this ability to have really significant upward, economic and social mobility."

"It is harder now, particularly for this group that’s kind of in the middle, working-class background and even middle-class, to get the kind of opportunities that I’ve had."

Higher tuition also is a problem, she said. Currently, just one year’s tuition at the University of Chicago Law School is $49,875.

"What is especially exciting about the Cafaro Scholarship program is that it will make possible the creation of a new generation of Debbie Cafaros," Dean Michael H. Schill said in a statement. Cafaro is "a visionary leader and is committed to making the world a better place," he said.

In an interview, Schill said Cafaro had a great law school experience.

"She loved her time here, and the faculty loved her," he said. "She has been an active leader at the law school ever since she graduated."

Graduates of his school who do take on debt to finance their education, he said, "will be able to pay that debt with no trouble" if they go to work in a law firm.

Almost 70 percent of the 2012 graduating class at the school took full-time jobs in law firms. The average salary for the class, of those who reported that information to the school, is listed on the school website as $119,000.

But the school worries about graduates who take jobs in government service or public-interest law at nonprofits, Schill said, which is why it allows alumni to pay down debt through a loan forgiveness program.

“What Debbie’s scholarships do is they make the school much more attractive to students of limited financial means who may be reticent to take on debt or may be unable to take on debt," he said.

Scholarship awards will be based on financial need, the school said. The first four recipients will be selected before the start of the next academic year.

When it is possible for some people “to go to law school and not have to take on tremendous debt,” Schill said, “it frees them up to pursue whatever career they want.”

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