



Tony Cotto: Chairman, Republican National Lawyers Association, George Washington University Law School, Washington, DC

[By Charisse Dengler]

“The lawmaking process is most affected by people with influence, money, and the desire to see things changed for the better,” Tony Cotto, a May 2006 graduate of George Washington University (GWU) Law School, said when asked what he learned during his summer internships.

Cotto, who is now working at the U.S. Office of Special Counsel, spent his 1L summer interning with the Competitive Enterprise Institute and working at Taxpayers Against Fraud; but it was the time he spent working with the Republican National Lawyers Association (RNLA) that really helped shape his law school career. In fact, it was his boss at the RNLA during his 2L summer and 3L year, Mike Thielen, who influenced him the most during law school.

“He is a former lobbyist and researcher and an unbelievably adept political operative,” Cotto said of Thielen, who is the RNLA’s Executive Director. “His sensibility and perspective on the entire Beltway life was fantastic to help me put my life and future career in perspective.”

In addition to being chair of the GWU Law School’s chapter of RNLA, Cotto worked as Assistant Director of the RNLA—a part-time position during the school year and a full-time position during the summers.

“In my role as the RNLA’s Assistant Director, I was responsible for a host of things involved in the day-to-day operations of a 3,500-member-plus lawyers association,” he said. “This included everything from the menial tasks of entering members’ updated addresses into our database to big tasks like representing the group at right-wing coalition strategy meetings. I was also occasionally responsible for drafting press

releases, conducting research on judicial nominees, managing our blog, helping put together conference materials, and traveling to staff many of our local chapter events around the country.”

Throughout the year, the RNLA hosts forums during which lawmakers and lawyers explore topics of interest to Republican lawyers. In addition, the association has a National Policy Conference and national and local Election Law Seminars. These Election Law Seminars are meant to inform attorneys on the process of litigating election challenges and recounts.

“The RNLA also helps make arrangements to send lawyers to precincts around the country as election monitors. I spent the 2004 election as part of the RNLA/Bush-Cheney legal team in Dayton, OH,” Cotto said. “The RNLA also participates in just about every event related to the confirmation of President Bush’s judicial nominees. On the more fun and celebratory side, the association hosts several embassy receptions and awards ceremonies to celebrate the recipients of the Edwin Meese and the Republican Lawyer of the Year awards.”

At GWU Law School, Cotto was also a member of both the St. Thomas More Society and the Federalist Society. He thinks student organizations are a great way to make friends with people who are passionate about the same things you are.

“While I respect greatly the people who poured all their efforts during law school into academics, I think student organizations are equally important, if not more important,” he said. “They were essential to me for developing friendships with like-minded students [and] contacts with famous scholars and public policy figures, and [they] provide a great discussion forum for things that often interest law students but do not come out in the pedagogy of classes.”

Cotto said his current position at the U.S. Office of Special Counsel is exactly what he expected when he accepted the offer, even though it’s not what he thought he would be doing after graduating from law school. However, he admits that this is probably because he had “no idea what [he] would be doing after law school.”

“At the U.S. Office of Special Counsel, it is our mission to promote good governance by investigating and prosecuting abnormalities in executive branch employment matters, with specific jurisdiction where the Hatch Act and the Whistleblower Protection Act are concerned,” Cotto said.

Cotto applied to law school because he has always been interested in why people make the decisions they make and because he enjoys the “vast universe of factors, considerations, and gamesmanship that go into the final product of why and how laws are made.”



STUDENT PROFILE

"I also love to argue and make people think twice about their choice of words, so law school seemed like a great fit," he said.

Overall, Cotto said he appreciates the uncertainty of the law and enjoys the process of coming up with "creative and appropriate" solutions to situations.

"As much as every law student appreciates doctrinal certainty because it makes an exam easier, I always enjoyed hypothetical situations more because they were an opportunity to truly get at why laws are structured the way they are," he said. "The law can never account for every 'what if' situation, but it is fun to try."

ON THE NET

Republican National Lawyers Association
www.rnla.org

George Washington University Law School
www.law.gwu.edu/default.htm

U.S. Office of Special Counsel
www.osc.gov