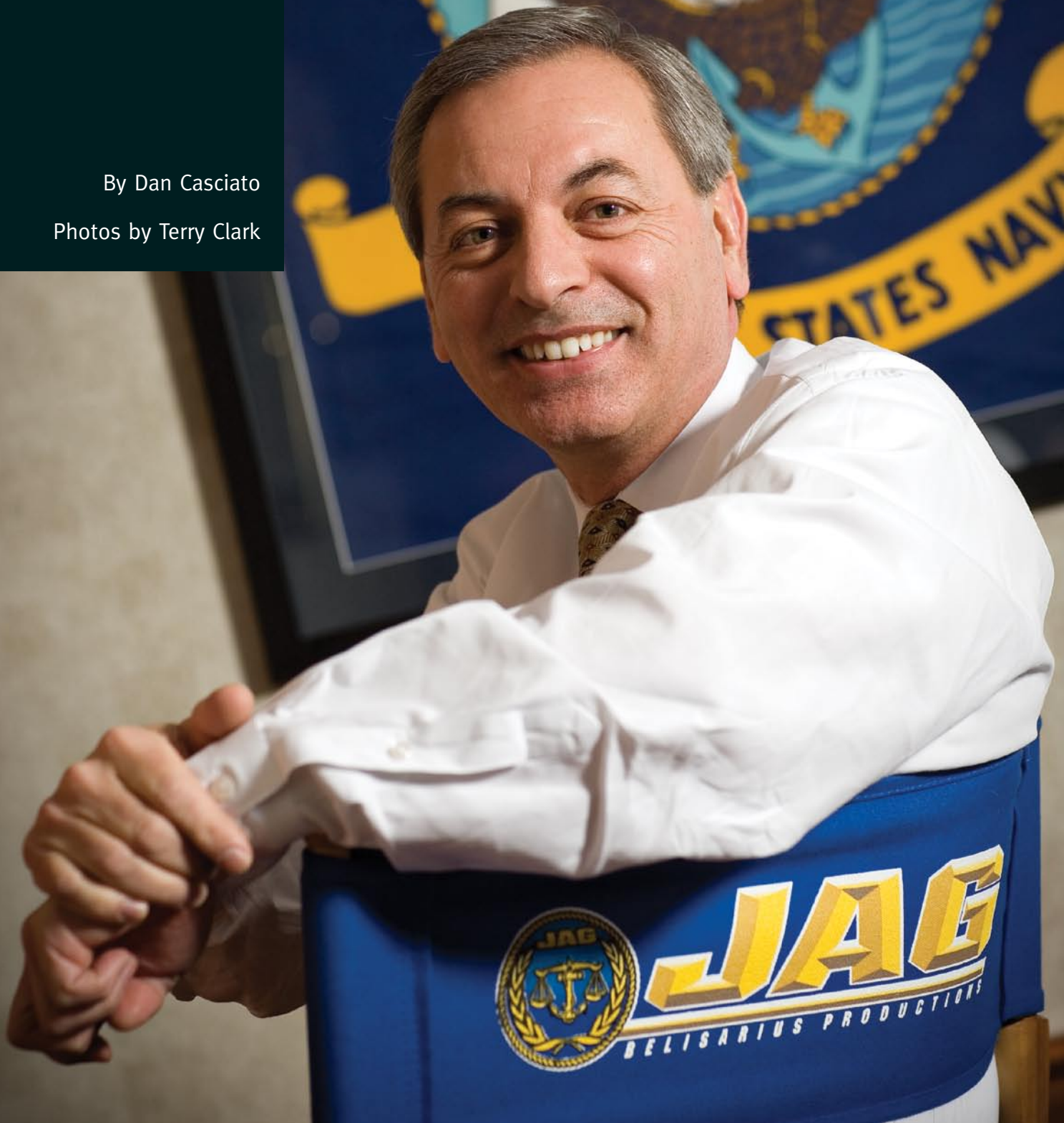



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ADMIRABLE ADMIRAL

By Dan Casciato

Photos by Terry Clark





Duquesne's law dean learned about leadership as the Navy's Judge Advocate General

As the former Judge Advocate General (JAG) for the U.S. Navy and one of the people who was working in the Pentagon on 9/11, Don Guter knows how to handle stress. But when the current dean of the Duquesne University law school occasionally needs to blow off steam, he likes to lace up his boxing gloves and hammer away at a portable punching bag in his office.

"My stepfather taught me that in addition to being a great workout, boxing is the greatest way to relieve stress," Guter says. "I started to realize that if you hit a heavy bag for three minutes, rest for one minute, then hit it again for three minutes, as though you were in a boxing match, it's an amazing workout and it does relieve stress. It's something that I have kept with me over the years."

These days, Guter only laces up periodically, "If I'm still at work late at night and I need a little pick me up before I do more work." But he may have needed the bag more often when he returned to his legal alma mater in August 2005. As the new dean of the law school, Guter was shocked when he reviewed the bar exam results for the school's 2005 graduating class. "We only had a 68 percent bar passage," he says. "I was surprised and hurt."

Guter's own class of 1977 had a 100 percent pass rate, one of three consecutive classes with a perfect outcome, and the former sailor wasn't about to see his ship take on more water with him at the helm. "We really went to work hard on improving the passage rate," he says.

Guter created a new Director of Bar Services position and hired an attorney whose sole job was to help prepare Duquesne law students to take and pass the bar exam. Within a year, the school improved its bar passage rate by 20 points to 88 percent, and 91 percent of the school's graduates passed the bar last year.

"We had to get those numbers up for our own reputation and to keep it going," Guter says. "We have a moral obligation of getting (students) through the bar so they can pass, go practice, and make a difference in the lives of other people."



“Dean Guter is a bona fide hero. He was at the Pentagon when 9/11 happened and he helped evacuate the building that day. Anybody who serves our country for as long as Admiral Guter did is just amazing and selfless. He’s a good man. We’re lucky to have him.”

Those who know Guter aren’t surprised by his fierce dedication to improvement. “You really have to lead by example and persuasion and Dean Guter does that very well,” says Nick Cafardi, Guter’s predecessor as dean who remains on the law school’s faculty. “He’s extremely insightful and he has the ability to see very quickly through the heart of the matter. He’s extremely open-minded and fair-minded. He’s very clear that he wants to do the best things and right things for the law school. And that makes him an easy leader to follow.”

Guter learned a lot about leadership in the Navy. As a rear admiral and the Navy’s top lawyer, he led

1,800 active duty, reserve and civilian lawyers, and 1,000 paralegals. “You hire the best people you can and then get out of their way,” he says. “You prepare yourself to become a success by surrounding yourself with the best people and then listening to them. I try to live this practice.”

As a child, the Latrobe native “religiously” watched the old “Victory at Sea” television series. He wanted to join the Navy since he was eight. “I just wanted to be around ships, steam around the world, see other countries and meet other people,” he says.

Guter signed up after he graduated from the University of Colorado and was stationed in Norfolk, Va. He loved serving in the Navy, but the world he wanted to see had become very different from the world depicted in the television shows he watched as a child.

“I was a product of the late ‘60s and early ‘70s, and we had the civil rights movement, women’s rights movement, the Vietnam War,” he says. “Those were some tough times. There were

assassinations and social turmoil.”

While serving as a line officer, Guter had a collateral duty as the legal officer on his ship. His job assisting Navy lawyers “opened up” his world, Guter says. “There were all of these domestic and foreign policy issues which I wanted to try to influence. And I wondered if there was a way for me to do both, serve in the Navy and become a lawyer.”

After receiving his law degree, Guter spent the next 25 years rising through the ranks of the JAG Corps. He became the head of the Corps at a time when it was being glamorized by the hit CBS television show “JAG.” Rank has its privileges and Guter made a cameo appearance on the show in a 2001 episode. He played himself but was given a different title since the show already had a regular character in his position. In the closing scene, the fictional JAG tells Guter that he could have his job any time he wanted. “And I responded, ‘you couldn’t pay me enough to be the Judge Advocate General,’” Guter says. “For people who knew, I guess it was somewhat amusing.”

The cast and crew honored Guter by giving him a director’s chair, which he proudly keeps in his office. “It was a lot of fun being on the set,” he says. “They were all very nice and treated us like we were part of the cast, not like we were just guests. I was impressed with how nice everybody was.”

More serious business intervened several months after his “JAG” episode aired. Guter was in the Pentagon on 9/11 and says he understood the anger and the fear that followed. But he also believed that the country needed cool heads.

“I remember saying by day three, hey, we’re making policy for the long term of the United States here,” he says. “We have to get off the policy based on fear and revenge.” Guter became an outspoken critic of harsh interrogation techniques and “the erosion of civil liberties in the name of security.”

Guter retired from active duty in 2002 to become the CEO of a continuing care retirement community in McLean, Va., and executive director of the Navy Marine Coast Guard Residence Foundation, which raises money for veteran officers so they can live in the retirement community. The boards for both entities were comprised of former admirals and generals, but Guter continued to speak out against torture.

"The biggest risk a lawyer can take is when they defend an unpopular position or what seems to be an unpopular position," he says. "I remember my wife asked me if I was willing to lose my job over this and I said, 'Yes, because it's the right thing to do. If I have to lose my job, I'll lose my job.' And she said, 'Then I'm with you.' It turned out that a lot of the board members agreed with me and told me they were glad I was doing this. They were very supportive and I appreciated it."

"You will always have a sense of contentment to know or feel that you did the right thing and put someone else first and helped them in the process," Guter adds. "It's good for the soul."

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Guter's extensive travel with the Navy caused him to lose touch with the Duquesne law school for many years. But in 2001 he was selected to be the inaugural recipient of the law school dean's career achievement award.

"I was happy as a dean that we reconnected with him because he is one of our most prominent graduates," Cafardi says. "Dean Guter is a bona

fide hero. He was at the Pentagon when 9/11 happened and he helped evacuate the building that day. People in his building were killed. Anybody who serves our country for as long as Admiral Guter did is just amazing and selfless. He's a good man. We're lucky to have him and I hope we keep him."

Guter seems quite content with the move from being a leader of sailors to a leader of students. "I'm not just dean of a law school," he says. "I am dean of my law school."

When he was named to the position in 2005, Guter borrowed a slogan from his Army colleagues and said he would "work with the faculty to ensure Duquesne is the best law school it can be." He also said he would make it a priority to enhance the school's interaction with its alumni. Last July, he hired attorney Jeanine DeBor as Duquesne's Director of Alumni Law Relations.

"After our first meeting and interview, I really wanted to come and work with him and for him because he had so many goals set," DeBor says. "His being here at the law school has certainly

moved the law school forward in terms of producing successful students, lawyers, and raising the profile of the law school and the academic excellence of the law school. He's very forward thinking and very progressive. He allows his people to do what we need to do to get our jobs done."

DeBor says Guter also spends a lot of time talking with the school's alumni. "Our alumni respond very well to him because he's very personable and down to earth," she says. "Alumni participation has increased significantly since he's been here. We doubled membership in the alumni law association this past year alone."

Guter also listens when the alumni speak. After one of them implored him to do something to improve the legal research and writing skills of students, Guter created a full-time position for a research and writing director. "He is in the process now of making annual improvements to the program, which include bringing in permanent full-time writing instructors," Guter says. "We want to get the reputation of graduating students who are ready to go practice, research and write."

Guter says he most enjoys seeing his students pass the bar and hit the ground running in their jobs as newly minted lawyers. "Seeing the look on their faces on graduation day, seeing the looks or getting the e-mails from them after they passed the bar, and then

learning from them that they got their first job, to me that is part of the job," he says. "If that happens to me on any given day, my day is a success."

One of the students benefitting from Guter's leadership at the law school happens to be his wife, Patricia, who is in the second year of the evening law program. Throughout their marriage, Patricia had indicated several times that she would like to go back to school for a law degree, but the time never seemed right until he took the position at Duquesne, Guter says.

Guter says he was not involved with the admission process and treats his wife like all of his other students. As with any student, Guter says he's happy to help when asked, but his wife seldom asks. "I am really proud of her for taking on such a challenge and succeeding at it," he says. "She's a good time manager and is very intelligent."

Family has always been important to Guter. He and his wife have two daughters, both of whom are married. One has a five-year-old son and the other is expecting. The Guters' oldest daughter surprised them after the birth of her son by giving him a name that would always honor her dad. Her married name begins with the letter G, and she named her son Jason Alexander. "She did that on purpose, just for me," Guter says. "So we call him Baby JAG. I even bought him a JAG Corps hat when I went to see him in the hospital for the first time." 🐾

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