

PUBLIC LIVES

PUBLIC LIVES; Hometown Lawyer for Victims of Ferry Crash

By Lynda Richardson

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IT is a calm cruise across New York Harbor, though shrouded in fog and snow flurries. Anthony Bisignano, a Staten Island lawyer, squints to make out familiar landmarks in water the color of wet cement.

Mr. Bisignano wants to make a point, well, several points, really, as he stands on the mostly deserted bottom level of the Staten Island ferry, the American Legion. The boat lumbers along on a morning run to the St. George ferry terminal in the city's most isolated borough.

Mr. Bisignano represents 25 victims in the Oct. 15 crash in which another ferry, the Andrew J. Barberi, plowed at cruising speed into a pier near the terminal. The crash left 10 people dead and dozens of others injured.

The courts are now swelling with civil claims, criminal investigations are focusing on the actions of the ferry's two captains before the crash, and Mr. Bisignano, 46, is getting the biggest burst of news media attention in his life.

Mr. Bisignano, it seems, has appeared everywhere, expressing the emotions of victims eager to find out what happened, and his outrage at the city's effort to limit its liability in the crash.

On this day, he is asked why he has so many cases. He explains simply that his practice consists of homeboys. "It was a natural occurrence that they would call our office," he says, adding that his firm, Bosco, Bisignano & Mascolo, represents the largest number of victims in the crash. He handles the firm's maritime accident cases.

Another question lingers. What about those advertisements the firm placed on a community cable station and in *The Staten Island Advance*? It will have to wait.

The ferry slows after passing a buoy. "Feel that," he says. "That didn't happen on Oct. 15. You're reading a magazine, not paying attention, and without warning, the accident happens. They really had no clue what was going on. The accounts I have from people is they never felt it slow."

Mr. Bisignano, who has short brown hair and a stocky build, still stands on the lower deck. "This level was cut through by the concrete pier like a sardine can," he says glumly. He is seeking \$10 million in damages for each victim.

One is now eager to get off the ferry. Mr. Bisignano is, too. He is enthusiastic about the interview. He is honored, just ah-nahd, he says in thick New Yorkese. He has some ideas of how to spend the afternoon.

When the ferry docks, he walks briskly to a stately columned building, the State Supreme Court for Richmond County. He says his biggest presence is in this courthouse, though he has cases in every courthouse in every borough of the city. (The ferry cases are being handled in Federal District Court in Brooklyn.)

HE takes an interviewer on a surprise stroll to some judges' chambers. The visit is a surprise to the justices, Leonard P. Rienza and Philip G. Minardo. They are polite but seem as if they would have gotten along just fine, thank you, without the sudden appearance of a reporter and a photographer. They steer clear of saying much. It feels a bit awkward. Mr. Bisignano sits upright, grinning like an eager schoolboy. O.K., he knows the judges.

Later, Mr. Bisignano, the son of an auto mechanic and a homemaker, steers his silver BMW down residential streets to his firm. He is explaining that he has known his two partners, John Bosco and Anthony Mascolo, since they were students and varsity athletes at Monsignor Farrell High School. The practice was formed nearly 20 years ago.

"Staten Island is unlike most places in that it's almost like in a time warp when you practice," he says. "It's a small legal community and the judges know all the lawyers and it's still a place where you can make agreements with the lawyers without reducing everything to writing."

At his firm, housed in two framed Colonials, his partner Mr. Mascolo affectionately calls out, "Tone!" He is also nicknamed Biz by colleagues and young players on the sports teams that he has coached. He has four sons, ages 18, 16, 13 and 6, with his wife, Kathy, a registered nurse. They moved to Monmouth County, N.J., three years ago.

He has a heck of a story about what steered him into studying at New York Law School. As a high school senior, he got a chunk of his nose sliced off when a plate glass window fell on him from a school building. The scar is barely detectable, repaired by skin grafts and plastic surgery. He received \$500 in a settlement.

"I saw something so wrong in terms of negligent conduct without compensation," he says indignantly. "I felt that by at least being a lawyer, I'd be in a position to know what is going on and to make sure other people didn't feel as I felt, upset about the system."

So let's get back to that advertisement. The New York State Bar Association issued an advisory soon after the crash, essentially reminding lawyers to behave as they scrambled to recruit clients with advertisements.

Mr. Bisignano says his advertisements were tasteful and straightforward; a conventional way to inform victims that his firm had maritime accident experience. He says that his firm picked up a few clients, but that most people already knew about the practice.

He goes on to say there is tacky, and then there is tacky. He says some of his clients told him that lawyers had solicited them with cards, letters and telephone calls as they lay seriously injured in their hospital beds. Carpetbaggers! Now that's tacky.

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