



The Chairman's Corner

by

Matt B. Murell

Matt.Murell@ColumbiacountyNY.com

RALPH GRAZIANO -- NEW PROBATION DIRECTOR

It has been a year for some new faces in top positions in Columbia County departments, and there's a new one to introduce.

On April 1, Ralph Graziano took over from retired county Probation Department Director Vince Doto.

Director Graziano is a 1988 Hudson High graduate, where he played football and baseball. Subsequently, he attended Columbia-Greene Community College before moving along to SUNY Cortland. There, he earned a B.A. in business administration with a minor in economics and finance.

In 1994, Director Graziano passed a civil service test and was hired as a county child support investigator, eventually working his way up to supervising support investigator. Then, in 2000, he became a probation officer.

"In the position of probation officer, you're helping people," he said, "and in the meantime you're trying to protect the community. Over the course of time, the position of probation officer has changed, as the legislation has changed. As we work more with alternatives to incarceration that makes the Probation Department all the more important."

"Keeping people out of jail seems to be the focus of the state," Director Graziano continued. "That being said, we are more involved. People come in constantly to see us, before sentencing and after sentencing, as an alternative to bail. I've always used the analogy that a probation officer is like the trunk of a tree, and we direct people to certain branches. Some need drug and alcohol counseling, some need mental health counseling, some need a simple opportunity for employment."

Noting "we have a great veteran staff here" at the county Probation Department that doesn't require a lot of direction, Director Graziano said, "I'm a proponent of putting the nine county probation officers in their strengths. Every person is different. Their strength may be in writing a report, while with another it's personal communication. You want a person who can come to work liking what they do and believing in themselves."

Director Graziano indicated there is a degree of burnout that can accompany being a probation officer: "You get tired. You like to see success, but unfortunately, this isn't a job you sometimes see a lot of success in. You may see someone who overdoses, and you wonder, could I have done something better? I kind of liken it to baseball, where if you fail seven out of ten times, you're still on the all-star team. You try to put things into perspective. A lot of times people come here because they've hit their worst. Sometimes the relationship you build with them is very important to them, because you might be the only person there. It's not always strict law enforcement. There's a very personal aspect to it."

The job of a probation officer can be very satisfying, said Director Graziano. "You may not know it, and you may not think it sometimes, but at the end of the day you can reflect and think, maybe I did help that person or that person."