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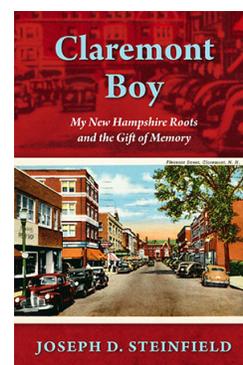
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My Hero Victor and Promises to His Mother

I don't usually write about lawyers, but Victor Garo isn't your usual lawyer. Victor is a sole practitioner with a second floor walk-up office in Medford Square. When he passed the bar in 1965, his parents took him to lunch. "Victor," his mother said, "Your father and I are very proud of you. We know you'll be able to make a good living. But promise me one thing – that you will remember your job is to help people." "I promise," he told her.

A year or so later, a man named Joe Salvati was convicted, along with five others, of participating in the murder of a smalltime thug named Teddy Deegan. The judge sentenced him to life without the possibility of parole.

A decade later, in 1977, a client of Victor's called from prison and told him that a man



In his book, *Claremont Boy: My New Hampshire Roots and the Gift of Memory*, Joe shares his humorous and insightful recollections spanning more than half a century.



named Joe Salvati needed a lawyer. Victor went to see him, and Salvati claimed he was innocent. Victor had heard that story before but agreed to look at the court file and talk to some people.

The only witness against Salvati at trial was a professional hit-man named Joe “The Animal” Barboza, who testified that the Mafia had hired him to kill Deegan and that he had recruited Salvati to drive the getaway car. The jury believed his testimony, but Victor wasn’t so sure. After reading the trial transcript, he thought to himself, “This just doesn’t add up.”

He went back to see Salvati and agreed to see if he could reopen the case. “How much will it cost?” Salvati asked. “I’d like a \$1500 retainer,” Victor answered.

Marie Salvati brought the \$1500 to Victor’s office. He later learned that she had borrowed the money, and that she and the four Salvati children were barely getting by. He gave back the \$1500. “She needed it more than I did,” Victor told me a long time later.

Over the next ten years, Victor spent countless hours on what everyone told him was a hopeless case. No fee, but a strong belief in his client’s innocence. He did research, filed motions, knocked on doors, met with the Parole Board, all to no avail.

During that time, Victor lived with his parents in Medford. Salvati often called the Garo home

Joe Steinfield at a book-signing event in May 2014.

from a prison payphone during the evening. Many times Victor would still be at work, so his mother would talk to Salvati. During those conversations, she got to know him, and through him his wife and his children.

Victor's mother became ill in the late 1980s. One evening, Victor was sitting by his mother's bedside. "Victor," she said, "promise me you will keep trying to help Mr. Salvati." "I didn't know it meant so much to you," he said. "It does," she told her son. "I believe he is an innocent man. Without you, he won't have anyone to help him." "I promise," Victor replied.

Ten more years went by, hundreds – no thousands – of hours of work, and eventually Victor started to make progress. In 1997, the Parole Board decided that Salvati, a model prisoner, should be released, and the Governor commuted his sentence.

Victor and his client wanted more, and they got it. In 2001, the Massachusetts court overturned Salvati's conviction. What Victor proved was that Salvati actually was innocent – set up by Barboza and corrupt FBI agents who knew that Barboza was lying but chose to protect their "sources." As a result, Joe Salvati missed out on 30 years – his four children growing up, their marriages, grandchildren, christenings, holidays – everything that makes life worthwhile.

Victor had been with him for 20 of those years, keeping his first promise, the one he made to his mother the day he passed the bar. On March 20, 1997, the day he walked Joe Salvati through the doorway from prison to freedom, Victor kept the second promise, the one he made at his mother’s bedside. Joe, Marie, their children, and grandchildren didn’t go directly home. Their first stop was the cemetery. Victor took Joe over to his mother’s gravestone. “Ma,” he said, “I brought you Joe.”

By [Joseph Steinfield](#)

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