

John Zavitsanos:

It's All Greek to Him

By ALLEN TANNER

Trying cases is a passion for John Zavitsanos, but so is being Greek. He was born in Greece, to a family of shepherds. He has performed in a traditional Greek dance troupe, and every summer spends a month at his second home on the exquisite Greek island of Lefkada where he runs his law practice by cellphone.

John's childhood home in a Greek village finally got electricity when he was five years old, and his parents brought him to the United States at age eight. They moved-in with his uncle's family in a one-bedroom basement apartment in Chicago.

John spoke no English and failed his first elementary class in his new country. But making sure his son got an education was of paramount importance to his father, who had none. Once John learned English, and though his parents could not read, he was expected to get all A's. In a show of gratitude when he graduated from the University of Michigan Law School, John had his father's name, Socrates Zavitsanos, put on his diploma.

When John moved to Houston, he quickly assimilated into the Greek community here and met his future wife Joni. "She was very involved in the dance troupe, so I didn't have much of a choice [about dancing with the troupe]," he said. He has danced at the Greek Festival many times, and their troupe even traveled to Greece twice.

The dance troupe included many Greek Houstonians who had never been to Greece. "It was super cool. There were a bunch of young people who had never been there. It was awesome to watch a light go on in them," he said.

"It's important to me not to lose the connection to Greece.

My grandfather fought in four wars to keep our family alive and defend his country. I feel like I'd dishonor him not to go back every summer. And I want my kids to have that part of their identity," he said.



Like John, Joni and their four children are all fluent in Greek. In fact, the eldest daughter spoke only Greek until she went to preschool. He sincerely believes speaking a second language enables you to think in an entirely different universe. "Most lawyers have mostly

professional friends and neighbors. They live and work in a bubble. Visiting Greece helps me anchor in two worlds, and I think I'm a better lawyer for it," he said.

Thanks to his Greek fluency and values that Greeks share, John has many clients of Greek heritage. He serves gyros, spanakopita, and baklava at some of the law firm's events. His wife Joni is an artist, and many of her bold Greek-feminist works are on the walls of his firm.

John is also passionate about his faith and plays a major role in the Greek Orthodox Church. In 2004, the church bestowed upon him its highest honor for a layman, recognizing him as an Archon of the Ecumenical Patriarchate. There are fewer than 750 Archons in the United States. In May 2018, John helped organize leaders of the Greek Orthodox Church in the United States for a religious freedom summit in New York City focusing on the persecution of Christians in the Middle East and Turkey.

Given his zeal for trying cases and the thrill of winning them, it's hard to imagine a day when John might retire. But if that day ever comes, returning to his homeland is always in the back of his mind. As he puts it, "Every first-generation Greek has dreams of one day going home." 

Allen Tanner was is a former prosecutor and current Houston criminal defense lawyer at Law Offices of Allen Tanner.



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