



Rocco V. Pugliese, founder of Pugliese Associates

Lobby

Rocco Pugliese at Pugliese Associates

By Barbara Trainin Blank

The large windows overlooking the Walnut Street side of Pugliese Associates offer a scenic view of state capitol and the park-like grounds surrounding it.

“We selected the location because it is close to the capitol, and our employees can look out and see it,” says Rocco V. Pugliese, the lobbying firm’s founder. “It’s an open venue.”

But the windows are also a symbol of transparency of Pugliese Associates’ business practices. (Rocco has no other title than founder and the generic “lobbyist,” because one of those practices is not to assign any.)

Rocco’s own personal office contains collages of family photos. But in reality, he doesn’t need photos for constant reminders

of at least his children. Nor does he need to wonder about where they are during the day. Daughter Tanza, 30, is a part-time employee in addition to having her own grant-writing business, Aardvark.

Son Anthony, 26, is a full-time lobbying employee. The apple doesn't fall far from the tree. Previously, the younger Pugliese was on Governor Tom Corbett's campaign and transition teams as well as legislative liaison to the State Department of Community and Economic Development. He also ran for office for a State House seat and came in second in a field of five.

Rocco is proud of his children but admits he expected a certain challenge when they began to work for the firm. That was shoptalk taking over family conversations. That didn't happen. "When we're together away from the office, we don't talk about it unless my kids initiate it."

Family pride in multiple generations is part of Rocco's value system. He learned the ethics of honesty and hard work from his parents. Rocco's mother was a beautician, and his father was a laborer with the public service electric and gas company in Trenton, New Jersey, where Rocco grew up.

He came to Harrisburg in 1975 to work for the State Senate as a researcher and later as an aide to the House Transportation Committee. He graduated the same year as his arrival in the state capital from Gannon University with a BA in political science.

Later, Rocco earned a master's in public administration from Penn State University's Middletown campus. After a stint of working for others, Rocco established his own eponymous firm in 1980. Being a business owner had been a long-time dream. He also knew whatever he did would be connected with government and politics.

The political passion "came from watching *Meet the Press* and other political shows on television," says the 59-year-old. "I was always interested."

He also knew that his particular focus would be on Pennsylvania's capital and environs, rather than Washington, D.C. Pugliese Associates has headquarters in Harrisburg, but also offices in Philadelphia and Allentown.

Aside from television's political show, Rocco was influenced by George Wolff, head of a lobbying firm who introduced the younger man to contract lobbying—as opposed to internal or corporate lobbying—which means diverse clients and different initiatives. Another mentor was Steve MacNett, former chief counsel to the Senate Republican Caucus.

The issues Pugliese Associates deals with have included horseracing funding, corporate takeovers, tobacco settlement, capital budget appropriations, workers' compensation, state procurement, and a variety of other policy or legislative issues.

Among the firm's clients are the University of Pittsburgh, IBM, Community College of Philadelphia, Orthopedic and Spine Specialists, and CH2M Hill, an international engineering firm.

Pennsylvania Report, an independent biweekly political newspaper, called Rocco one of the 100 political movers and shakers in the Commonwealth.

The firm is lean: Pugliese Associates currently has eleven employees, though during the time of the interview for this profile, Rocco was in the process of hiring another.

His managerial approach has high expectations of staff but also flexibility: "I want people to be honest and have a strong work ethic. I try not to micromanage." His approach toward lobbying is "very intense. We want to represent clients in an ethical and relentless manner. The clients engage us to represent their interests, and I take that very seriously."

He also emphasizes how much personality and building relationships are critical to a lobbying firm. "It's all about relationships. You need to build them on the Hill and in the governor's office and in agencies and in the world outside of the capital, or you won't be successful. It takes time, 'cause [building a reputation] is all word of mouth."

It helps that the fit between the requirements of the job and his own personality works. "I'm an extraverted person, and I don't get intimidated. If people say no, it's not personal. You try to sway them, but at the end of the day, it is what it is."

One challenge to his and other lobbying firms has been educational reform in the Commonwealth through school choice, a cause Rocco strongly believes in. "Some people don't have that choice, because of the lack of financial means, and their kids are in a system with violence or one that's nonperforming. It's problematic if the family can't move out of the system."

Pugliese Associates has supported providing opportunity scholarships through EITC credits and a grant for low-income kids at the worst public schools of up to \$850 a year. "This will allow thousands of children to attend the school of their choice."

Rocco's commitment to equality education extends to his community service as well. He currently serves on the board of the Joshua Group, a mentoring program for at-risk youth living primarily in the Allison Hill section of Harrisburg and headquartered there. The organization, founded and directed by Kirk Hallett, offers a 24/7 presence to serve the needs for mentoring and other outreach services.

Volunteering for the Joshua Group is also a family affair: Rocco's wife, Deb, volunteers as a tutor twice a week.

Rocco and Deb met 34 years ago on a blind date. The outcome was surprising, considering that "it was the first ever blind date for both of us."

Deb used to run the ultrasound department at the old Polyclinic Hospital. After the children were born, she became a stay-at-home mom.

In the past, Rocco was president of the Central Pennsylvania Leukemia Society. Now the Joshua Group is the centerpiece of his community service efforts. The economy and its downturn are low on his list of concerns, at least as far as the business goes. "You can't worry about things you can't control. There will always be a place for lobbying firms, though there may be mergers and acquisitions or a reduction in the number of some firms. But with close to 50 clients, ours is one of the larger lobbying firms in the state. We have a good base."

When he's out of the office, Rocco works out in the gym and plays tennis. He enjoys both fiction and nonfiction, with recent reads being *Unbroken* and *Game of Thrones*. His musical tastes are a throwback to the '70s—to such groups as the Eagles and Pink Floyd.

One thing Rocco doesn't do a lot of in or out of the office is wonder about a role for him beyond lobbying. Ask him what he would have become had that not been his career choice, and he says, "That's a scary thought. Maybe work inside government as a career staff person. But it would have something to do with government."

If he were to retire years from now, he'd be spending time near water, particularly at Sea Isle City, New Jersey, "just vegging out."

He also loves visiting Italy, where an aunt, uncle, and cousins live in the Calabria region. "I've been there twice, and my wife and daughter have been there, but my son hasn't yet. I'd love to go back and take him."

Montana and Glacier National Park, Grand Teton, and Yellowstone are other favorite travel destinations.

Just as the windows represent transparency, it's crystal clear from his pace and the way he smiles around the office that Rocco is, in his words, "a very content man" who considers himself blessed. "I'm content with how the firm is progressing. I have strong relationships with people on both sides of the aisle."

And another generation that enjoys lobbying.

