



the *Legacy* of  
*Joseph R. Coppola '40,*  
December 27, 1917 - December 17, 2003 *HON '90, PhD*

He was a decorated veteran; a beloved teacher and colleague; a devoted husband and father of 10; and a friend to all who knew him. A respected businessman, he built the foundation of the Canisius College Accounting Department; was responsible for the successful careers of some of the top accountants in the field; and was a mentor to hundreds of Canisius College students.

## *This is the legacy of Dr. Joseph R. Coppola.*

The Coppola/Canisius connection began more than 70 years ago when Joseph Coppola enrolled at Canisius High School in 1932. A man who embraced his Jesuit education, he continued his studies at Canisius College and received a BBA in accounting in 1940. He also earned an MBA from the prestigious Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania in 1941 and a PhD from the University of Ottawa in 1967.

When duty called, Coppola answered by joining the United States Army where he served in the European Theater during World War II. The young American soldier was awarded six battle stars and the Presidential Unit Citation. Upon returning home, Coppola continued to serve his country as a member of the Air Force Reserves, where he retired as a Lieutenant Colonel.

In 1946, Coppola began his teaching career at *alma mater* and also began courting Angela Sapienza, the woman who would become his wife. Their romance blossomed and the couple was married in 1947.

Coppola's career at Canisius also began to blossom as he made his mark on the college's Accounting Department.

From his early years in the department through his final years as a seasoned professor, Coppola was always a favorite among his students. "Joe brought accounting principles and practices to life," recalls George F. Kermis '70, PhD, professor of accounting at Canisius and Coppola's former student and colleague. "He was interesting. He didn't just teach theory; he showed us the practical application. He made accounting come alive."

Coppola's expertise was taxes. It was his class and he taught it well. A masterful teacher, he influenced the lives and careers of many prominent accounting alumni, including Eileen C. Crotty Sendor '78, chief financial officer at the law firm of Hodgson Russ LLP.

Coppola started his own tax practice in 1948 and Crotty had the good fortune to work there during her senior year. "Working with Joe, I was introduced to taxes on a more widespread level," she says. "And that is the direction, more or less, that my future took." Prior to her position at Hodgson Russ, Crotty served as a tax manager at Arthur Young and corporate controller at Computer Task Group (CTG).



ABOVE: A young Joseph Coppola in his United States Army uniform.

BELOW: Joseph and Angela Coppola.



With a tax firm, a growing family and a full-time teaching position, Coppola assumed the role of chair of the Accounting Department in 1962 and served in that capacity for 11 years. He also moderated the Accounting Society and administered the Accounting Internship Program for more than two decades. Kermis says that Joe Coppola placed countless students in successful internships, many of which led to job opportunities after graduation. One example is Thomas R. Emmerling '75, for whom Coppola arranged an internship at Dopkins and Company LLP. Today, Emmerling is managing partner at Dopkins and was recently named the 2004 Outstanding Accountant in Western New York at the college's Accounting Society Banquet. "The list goes on and on," says Kermis.

Kermis also credits Coppola for the development of the college's accounting major. "Joe put the foundation in the building that we are living in now. He started the college's Council on Accountancy and built a relationship with the business community that we still enjoy today. I think we have the oldest accountancy council in the country."

The college's accountancy council consists of more than 50 accounting and financial executives who serve as advisors to the department. It is through the council that alumni give back to the college by providing students with scholarship funds and employment opportunities. Alumni like Crotty, who is a member of the council, says that "Canisius does a very good job of helping its students and then keeping them connected as alumni. Joe was a big part of that."

While many of the contributions Coppola made to the Canisius Accounting Department are well known, perhaps not so well known is the fact that Coppola's doctoral thesis didn't focus on accounting, but rather on philosophy – the philosophy of education. "One day I was helping my dad in the office, like all of us kids



The entire Coppola clan gathered for Joe and Angie's 50th wedding anniversary. Six of the Coppola children and Coppola's son-in-law graduated from Canisius College. Currently, there are 31 grandchildren and one great-grandchild in the Coppola family.

did, and I came across his doctoral thesis," says Coppola's son, Leonard '72, who works in the Financial Controls Engineering Department at GM Powertrain. "I was surprised that his thesis didn't focus on accounting. But as I read it, I realized that my father truly lived his philosophy of education. In simple terms, my dad believed that there are three rules to being a successful teacher."

***Coppola's Rule Number One: When you teach someone, don't just teach the subject; make them a better person.***

A firm believer in the Jesuit philosophy of "being men and women for others," Coppola taught his children, as well as his students, to be better people. Leonard Coppola coached basketball for many years and recalls his father's advice. "He told me that it wasn't so important that I teach the kids how to be great basketball players but more important that they learn to be good sportsmen and good teammates."

Coppola says that his dad applied the same theory in his classroom, where he not only taught his students accounting but also taught them fair business practices.

***Coppola's Rule Number Two: Always make people feel special.***

Coppola took a personal interest in every accounting student in the department. He embraced his students and colleagues at Canisius as his second family. And, the feeling was mutual.

"He was a benevolent man, a father figure to all of us," says Crotty, who recalls that his students affectionately called him "Papa Joe." "If someone was graduating and didn't have a job, Papa Joe was the one who would make a few calls and set up an interview. He looked after all of us."

"It's true that everyone called him Papa Joe," adds Leonard Coppola. "I did, too. I also remember a lot of the guys joking that they loved to have my dad for class because they were guaranteed at least one day off each year — when my mom had a baby. They called it the 'Coppola holiday.' My mom had 10 children in 13 years!" One of those children is named Peter Canisius Coppola.

But for all the love and support he had for his students, it was tenfold at home. A devoted father, Coppola always made time for his big and growing family. "Even during tax season when he would leave the house for school early in the morning and return at 10 or 11 at night, he would take a few hours off during the day to come to our football or basketball games," says Leonard Coppola. And according to Angie Coppola, their family attended many Canisius events together over the years. It's still a Coppola family tradition to attend the college's alumni family Mass of Thanksgiving.

In 1982, Coppola established the Dr. Joseph R. Coppola Award to recognize the achievements

of the college's accounting alumni. "Presenting the Coppola Award was the highlight of the year for Joe," says Angie Coppola.

He finished his distinguished career at Canisius in 1984, but remained a close friend to his many colleagues and accounting alumni. In 1988, the Dr. Joseph R. Coppola '40 Scholarship fund was established with a gift from the Galasso Foundation in his honor to benefit Canisius accounting majors.

Coppola made people feel special and that is what made him special to others. He received an honorary degree from Canisius in 1990 for his 38 years of devoted service to *alma mater*. In 1991, Coppola received the LaSalle Medal, the highest honor the college's alumni association accords, for his service to Canisius and for his role in developing the college's prestigious accounting program.

***Coppola's Rule Number Three: Make the world a better place because you were born.***

Coppola led a rich and remarkable life devoted to his family, his community and *alma mater*. His name will long be associated with Canisius College through the accounting department he helped build, the successful businesspeople he mentored, fond memories of all that knew him, and the lives of the many students he touched. And like he did for so many years on campus, Papa Joe will continue to provide opportunities for accounting students for years to come through the scholarship program in his name.

"There was only one Joe Coppola and the world was a better place with him in it," says Kermis. "Everyone was a better person for knowing Joe Coppola," adds Crotty. "He left quite a legacy." ■



**LEFT - STATUE OF ST. PETER CANISIUS:** About 150 members of the Canisius family braved bitter cold in January of 1996 to attend the dedication of the St. Peter Canisius statue, gift of the Classes of 1994 and 1995. One special guest was Peter Canisius Coppola Jr., grandson of Joe and Angie Coppola.