

Richard Copaken

By : RAFAEL HERNANDEZ COLON

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Late one afternoon in June 1970, two young lawyers from Washington walked into my office—at the time, the office of the president of the Puerto Rico Senate—to seek my help concerning the cessation of naval operations in Culebra. They were Richard Copaken and Tom Jones from the prestigious law firm of Covington & Burling in Washington.

Ramón Feliciano, the mayor of Culebra, had managed to enlist the services of this firm on a pro bono (i.e., nonpaying) basis to defend the interests of Culebra against the U.S. Navy.

That afternoon began a relationship between Dick and I that spanned until I visited Washington three weeks ago with the intention of seeing the last exhibition of his paintings. At the time, he was undergoing experimental chemotherapy at Johns Hopkins for pancreatic cancer. He had called me a few weeks before to tell me about his diagnosis and that he had a couple of months to live. He hoped that with the chemo he could last it out until May next year when there would be the preview of a movie featuring his grandson Jacob.

But his wasn't a sad call. It was Copaken at his best. Full of optimism, he was facing his battle with terminal cancer without missing a beat regarding his current projects, one of which was the exhibition of his paintings at a Washington gallery and at his Covington & Burling law firm. The other was the presentation this month in Río Piedras of his book on Culebra, which is being published by the editorial board of University of Puerto Rico. I told him I would go to Washington after the elections to see him and go with him to the exhibition of his paintings.

A twist of fate made it impossible for us to meet. When I got to Washington after the election, I called his home but he wasn't there. He returned the call from Kennedy Airport in New York. He was taking a plane to Los Angeles because the producer of the film, in which his grandson had an important role, had arranged for a private showing for him. He wouldn't be back until Tuesday, and I had to leave early Monday morning. He told me to go by his office to see his exhibition and we would get together when he came down for the presentation of his book on Culebra.

His secretary ushered me into the exhibition the next day. I studied the paintings and the dates they were painted to detect signs of the terrible drama he was going through. I found none. Yet, our meeting for the presentation of the book was not to be. Dick Copaken passed away last Monday.

Puerto Rico owes Dick Copaken a profound debt of gratitude for his services to this island. They spanned his role in Culebra back in 1970 to his role in Vieques during the Calderón administration. The struggle

against the Navy to get it to cease the bombardment of Culebra was hard and bitter. For six years, Copaken, Feliciano and I had to struggle in Congress, with the Pentagon, the White House and in the U.S. national media to defeat the Navy. Dick was the strategist, a relentless force, day in and day out, for truth and justice.

At one point in 1971, when we had obtained a partial victory, the San Juan Star, on Nov. 1, 1971, editorialized in the following manner about Dick Copaken:

Victory on Culebra

“...Copaken’s contribution can’t be discounted. He has been tireless, single-minded and, apparently, just enough of an annoying gadfly to finally cause Navy officials to capitulate.

And he did it all as a public service and without getting a fee.

It would seem the Culebrans could show their gratitude in a positive way to Copaken. Perhaps they could throw a week-long fiesta in honor of the young lawyer. Or erect a statue to him in the town plaza.

Or...how’s this for an idea that’s only partially tongue-in-cheek: They could change the name of their one town Dewey to Copaken.”

Victory was finally obtained in 1975. Without Copaken’s courage, tenacity, creativity and his indefatigable pursuit of justice, this couldn’t have been accomplished. It was achieved without impairing in any way the good relationship of Puerto Rico with the U.S. When we held the victory celebration, U.S. senators and members of Congress came to celebrate with us. It was a victory for the people of Culebra to live in peace. It wasn’t an ideological victory. It wasn’t a battle about political status.

Another important contribution Dick Copaken made to Puerto Rico was the advice he gave me regarding the intentions of the Reagan administration in 1984 to repeal Section 936 of the U.S. Internal Revenue Code. This was a hot issue when I was elected governor in November 1984. At the time, Dick was advising me, as a friend, on federal matters.

We came up with the idea of using Section 936 to promote the economic development of the countries in the Caribbean. Twin plants could be started in those countries and in Puerto Rico by companies that would have the benefits of Section 936 in the U.S. Section 936 funds in Puerto Rican banks—we had about \$17 billion of them—could be used to finance economic-development projects in these countries.

I announced the idea in my inaugural speech Jan 2, 1985, and President Reagan shortly thereafter accepted the idea. Section 936 was saved and, with it, thousands of jobs in Puerto Rico. Over \$1.3 billion was invested in numerous Caribbean Basin countries. Puerto Rico became a leader in the Caribbean Basin.

May this column—which I write with love for Margie his widow, his daughters, Deborah, Jennifer, Laura and July, and his grandchildren, Jacob, Sasha, Leo, Samara and Oliver—be a tribute to Richard Copaken. Not only from me, but also from thousands of Puerto Ricans who were touched by his services and who will never know his name or the love he had for this island.

