

"It probably goes without saying how smart Michael [Romita] is. To excel in so many different roles, he'd have to be."

— Jim Green, Founding Partner
Mercury Strategies

A New Leader for New Times

Westchester County Association's new head honcho, Michael Romita, was tasked with replacing a local icon as the world collapsed around him. **By Tom Schreck**

▲ WCA's new CEO counts family-business owner, lawyer, scratch golfer, environmentalist, and lobbyist among his many previous roles.

Michael Romita's first day as president and CEO of the 70-year-old Westchester County Association was March 1, 2020. He had just replaced William Mooney Jr., a longtime local business leader who had established himself as one of the county's most visible and prominent figures by the time he retired. That in itself would spook most incoming chief executives, yet to make matters even worse, the world as we knew it would change just two weeks later.

"You know," says Romita, "the great philosopher Mike Tyson once said, 'Everybody's got a plan until they get punched in the face!'"

Romita arrived at the WCA armed with his own plans. Those rapidly had to be adapted, however, leaving him, like practically everyone else in the world, to focus only on the here and now of COVID-19 and its impact.

"The pandemic hijacked everyone's plans, but it has exposed challenges and opportunities for growth. Affordable housing, access to high-speed internet, the digital divide, ramping business up for telecommuting, and supporting the healthcare industry have jumped to the forefront," says Romita, who admits that any other agenda he may have had coming into his new job got summarily changed by the pandemic.

It has been a big pivot for Westchester and how business will be done here. Still, Romita remains optimistic about the future. "Sure, we are going through a very difficult period here, with over 14 percent unemployment in the county and somewhere between \$90 million and \$160 million in reduced tax receipts. Yet, a recent WCA survey showed a clear majority of folks remain optimistic about Westchester's future and feel the economy will bounce back within the

next three years. Only 10 percent were pessimistic about the county's economic future."

Romita received his undergraduate degree at Tufts University, where he was a scratch golfer on the varsity team who majored in geology and Earth science. He went on to study environmental law at the University of Michigan and became a trial attorney for the United States Department of Justice. "The environment has always been important to me, and with the Department of Justice, I got to wear the white hat and go after corporate polluters," he says.

It was a job he loved, and, career-wise, he'd have been happy to stay in Washington. Practicing environmental law was his goal, and he was doing it at the highest level. Then, he got a call from home to come back to run Castle Oil, the Harrison-based family business his grandfather started in 1928.

"It was the only thing that would've brought [me] back," says Romita. "This was the legacy that my family had, and we were very fortunate. It was a thriving company, [but] our business was evolving into some nontraditional areas, and my family needed help.

"Moving on from DOJ was tough," he continues, "but I felt like I had a responsibility to my family and wanted to be a part of the legacy they had built. Working with my dad, my sister, and my uncles was very special, and I am proud of what we accomplished together."

Wait a minute. This stalwart of environmental justice left prosecuting the ecological bad guys to run an oil company? Did that mean he couldn't look his green buddies in the eye anymore? To this question, Romita explains he had to adapt from being an environmental regulator to a member of the regulated community. "Castle Oil is a large and thriving oil-distribution company, and because of the way the company was run, I was not embarrassed to be in the oil business at all," he says.

His time leading Castle was not only personally and professionally satisfying; it also enhanced his education. Running a family business right here in Westchester prepared him for his future, as it is one thing to have a general sense about how business works; it is another thing entirely to live it.

"Coming back to the county and being involved in the family business gave me a real insight into the struggle of running your own business. It really prepared me for the WCA," he says. "We sold our business in late 2014 to Sprague Resources LP, and they have been running it ever since. Between then and taking over at WCA, I worked as a partner at Mercury Strategies, LLC, a DC-based public-policy firm, while cofounding Ranger Asset Management LLC, a commercial real estate investment and management firm."

Romita's background served him well at Mercury. A lobbying firm, Mercury works with companies like AT&T, Verizon, and CenturyLink, helping them navigate legislative and regulatory challenges. It meant working with federal agencies, Congress, and the regulatory world on policies centered around emerging technology trends.

"It probably goes without saying how smart Michael is. To excel in so many different roles, he'd have to be," says Jim Green, founding partner of Mercury Strategies. "The most amazing thing is his ability to be empathetic. He can hold a conversation with an oil company executive, a congressman, an angry attorney, or the CEO of a Fortune 500 company. He listens to people, and because of that, the WCA is in good hands."

From the Department of Justice to the family business and on to legislative work, it has been a varied trek for a professional who trained as an attorney. ("I like to consider myself a recovering lawyer. I haven't been in a courtroom in 20 years," he laughs.) Yet, it was back to the business he grew up in that prepared Romita most for leading the WCA.

Both of Romita's grandfathers immigrated to the U.S. from Italy, settled in the Bronx and forged their own versions of the American dream. One came to the country as a teenager to found what became the Castle Oil Company; the other was a barber and professional musician. Romita's dad took over Castle, so young Michael grew up in a house where the family business insinuated the household zeitgeist, which included a philosophy about giving back to the community.

"My parents served on many nonprofit boards," says Romita. "They were involved in universities and hospitals, and they helped start an orphanage in Italy. My mom has also been very involved with the Pelham Arts Center."

Romita, along with his wife, Melissa, continues to carry on that same tradition of community service that was estab-



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lished by his family, which even launched its own eponymous foundation. "With the Castle Foundation, we support early childhood education; there's so much research that shows if interventions are early, children can really develop," says Romita, who, in the past, has chaired the MINT Foundation in support of mental health research. "I've always been passionate about the environment, sure, but mental health is just so important, too," he adds.

Free time is a rarity for Romita, but spending time with his daughter, Isabella, is at the very top of his to-do list. "Izzy is a typical eighth grader and is involved in all those typical eighth-grader things," says Romita, clearly lighting up when speaking of her. "She's a TikTok connoisseur and keeps me on my toes. She has us busy, just like you'd expect."

He also still enjoys golf and gets out to play a round with his friends when he can. No, the game doesn't mean to him what it used to, back in his varsity scratch-handicap days at Tufts, but he still picks up the sticks, though for somewhat different reasons.

"My golf game is about spending time with friends and not about the score anymore," says the member of storied Winged Foot Golf Club in Mamaroneck, one of the most challenging courses in the U.S. "People ask me how I handle the greens at the club. I tell them: 'That's simple; I don't,'" he says with a laugh.

When asked about his favorite Westchester restaurants, Romita diplomatically demurs rather than play favorites — though it does seem that pomp and circumstance are not his preferred ambience. "You're just as likely to find me at one of our local diners," Romita admits. "I love the old diners, especially places like the Mamaroneck Diner."

In some ways, it all fits. An environmentalist who owned an oil company, an attorney who doesn't practice, a DC lobbyist who has found peace back home in Pelham, and even a Mets fan whose family hails from the Bronx. And now, Romita is charged with leading the commercial sector in Westchester County at a time when companies are just beginning to get back to business.

"We're heading into an era in which the suburbs are going to look more attractive. We have a vibrant healthcare system that employs 70,000 people, and we have all the arts people are drawn to," Romita says. "There are lots of reasons to be optimistic." ●

Tom Schreck is a freelance writer from Albany, NY, who is a frequent contributor to Westchester Magazine and 914INC.