

Renaissance Man

Having excelled as a lawyer, writer, and professor, Neil Thomas Proto, '67, establishes a scholarship designed to help Southern students succeed.

By Jack Kramer

When you look at Neil Thomas Proto's body of work, it is hard to believe that he was, in his own words, "not an exceptional student" during his undergraduate years at Southern Connecticut State University.

"I had an overall average of about a 2.75, and, if I recall correctly, maybe a 3.5 in my major," says Proto, '67, who focused his studies in history and political science. "Most of that was the product of my junior and senior years."

Proto has enjoyed great success in numerous fields since graduating from Southern close to 50 years ago, giving heightened meaning to the phrase late bloomer. His public service and private practice in law includes 45 years of experience in land use, environmental, and federal litigation, as well as teaching assignments at Yale and Georgetown universities. Proto is also an accomplished author, having covered topics ranging from Three Mile Island to baseball.

His contributions to the law field began early. In 1971 and 1972, while still a law student at George Washington University, he chaired Students Challenging Regulatory Agency Procedures (SCRAP). Their work resulted in the first Supreme Court case to consider the National Environmental Policy Act (1973), and the court ultimately concluded that SCRAP had standing to sue. Since that time, both as an appellate attorney with the United States Department of Justice and in private practice, Proto has orchestrated legal, cultural, and political challenges on behalf of public and private entities. Widely held as a leading environmental litigator, he has fought against the construction of highways on civil rights grounds, shopping malls, coal-fired utility plants, the use of natural resources, and harm to Indian reservations.

In 1993, for example, Proto drafted a unique statutory scheme at the behest of the state of Hawaii that resulted in the conveyance of Kaho'olawe Island from the United States to Hawaii for the special use of native Hawaiians. Another legal battle pitted Proto against the Walt Disney Company, which planned to open a park in Virginia near historically important Civil War sites. Working pro bono on behalf of the Natural Trust for Historic Preservation and Protect Historic America (a group of writers and historians including Pulitzer Prize-winning authors David McCullough and James McPherson), Proto achieved what some considered impossible — helping to stop Disney in its tracks.



Pictured at left and in a 1967 yearbook photo, Neil Thomas Proto received Southern's Leadership Award in his senior year.

Proto's passion extends to the arts. He sat on the board of directors of the Shubert and Long Wharf theaters in New Haven, and served as chair of the city of New Haven's Committee for the Commemoration of the 75th Anniversary of the Execution of Bartolomeo Vanzetti and Nicola Sacco. Working with director Tony Giordano, he also co-adapted from the original Dutch the musical drama, "The American Dream, The Story of Sacco and Vanzetti" which was performed at the Shubert in April 2002.

And there is much, much more for Proto, who continues to consider his time at Southern as playing an integral role in his life story — so much so that he's establishing an endowed scholarship in his name at the university.

The Neil Thomas Proto Scholarship Fund provides practical support to undergraduate or graduate students seeking to attend law school. "Practical support" is defined as providing all or a portion of the cost of the Law School Admission Test (LSAT), the LSAT preparation course, and law school application fee or fees.

"Southern had special virtues," says Proto. "It welcomed first-generation students with decent academic standings, and it was within my financial reach. I had a scholarship from the New Haven Scholarship Fund, which covered my tuition, and with a part-time job and my parents' help — and my dad's car, when necessary — we could afford it."

As he recalls, Southern had deep roots in the community, with education majors completing their student teaching in New Haven public schools, and students and faculty members often volunteering with charitable and community groups.

Proto was raised with a similar commitment. "I was the product of a working-class family, with parents who were civically active — with a strong sense of values about fairness. They were informed," he says. "Both supported education for their three children, and were involved in all aspects of our academic lives. . . . My brother Richard, my sister Diana, and I were products of New Haven's public schools, and the first to go to college in our family. That was the case with most of my classmates at Southern."

Proto developed as a leader at Southern. He was student body president in his senior year (1966-67) and received the Leadership Award in 1967. His ties to the university remained strong, with Proto delivering Southern's commencement address in 1976 and receiving the Outstanding Alumnus Award in 1981. He, in turn, recounts that the late President Emeritus Michael J. Adanti was an inspiration. "I walked the halls at Southern Connecticut; I knew as a student and friend — and admired its latter president — Michael Adanti and his special commitment," says Proto. "Michael's model ensured that many graduates, myself included, never forgot Southern's valued place in our lives."

He continues: "I applaud Southern's ongoing mission to educate and inspire. The scholarship is intended to make this imperative plain. The financial constraint is often the one requiring the most imagination, persistence, and risk-taking to confront — but once managed, the intellect and imagination can blossom in ways that could lead to success. . . . I wanted to lessen that constraint."