

Ethics class led by lawyer who stole from clients

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Figuring nobody knows sin like a sinner, St. Petersburg Junior College has hired a former lawyer who stole from his clients to teach a class on ethics.

Dennis Correa pleaded guilty to five counts of grand theft a year ago, after years of shuffling money from one client account to another in a desperate attempt to cover up a trail of theft. By the time authorities caught on, more than \$900,000 was missing.

"They say you are as sick as your secrets," Correa said at his sentencing. "And I was a very sick man."

But Correa's experiences, and his repentant attitude, qualify him to speak to students about ethics with special insight and impact, said Ed Long, SPJC associate vice president. "Sharing their experiences with students is a way these people can pay something back to society," Long said.

Correa is teaching one class at the Clearwater campus and has lectured at other ethics classes on other SPJC campuses, Long said. As an adjunct instructor, he is being paid about \$1,700 for a 16-week term ending this month.

The program is called "ROPE," for Restoration of Professional Ethics. Correa is the second participant. The first, another lawyer, is no longer in the program.

SPJC "has always been on the cutting edge of ethics education," Long said. "We were the first junior college in America to require an ethics course as a graduation requirement."

Thus far, student evaluations of Correa have been positive, he said.

But not everyone is happy with the arrangement.

Science professor Jerry Smith, a biology instructor at the SPJC Clearwater campus for 20 years, called the situation "an embarrassment to the school."

"When I heard about it, I couldn't believe it. I support the ethics program, but I don't think they need it taught by a convicted felon.

"If they want to hire him and bring him in as a bad example, I have no problem with that. But they've made him a member of the faculty, and that's wrong.

"It's a little like Ted Bundy teaching women a class on personal safety."

Harold Dent said he isn't sure what to make of Correa's appointment. Dent is trustee of the Myrtle Trembley Trust, from which Correa took about \$390,000.

"There was only about \$60,000 he didn't get," Dent said Monday. "And he's only paid back about \$1,600. But if he's

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sincere, and if it will help pay back the money, I'll be glad."

Correa said he understands the skepticism.

"I know there are negative feelings toward me," he said, "but I think my story can benefit the community."

For 16 years, Correa built a reputation as a respected trust attorney, overseeing up to \$25-million in estates and trusts.

At his sentencing by Pinellas Circuit Judge Claire K. Luten a year ago, a number of well-known people, including SPJC president Carl Kuttler, asked for leniency. Luten not only departed from sentencing guidelines but gave Correa 30 years of probation, a lighter sentence than even his attorney had suggested.

Correa said Monday he intends to pay back the money he took.

He said his family and church have continued to support him, but finding work has been tough. "It seems every time someone writes an article about me, I lose a job. But I know that's a consequence of what I did."

He said he would like to continue in the SPJC job but knows he can't count on it. "The program will be reviewed; I will be reviewed. I was told that up front."

But students need to hear his message, he said.

"Frankly, I think I know good-bad, right and wrong, and yet look how badly I failed. I can show students how these things can happen.

"I stumbled and fell badly, and so I tell the students, catch yourself before you stumble, before you hurt yourself and others."

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Abstract (Document Summary)

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