



JAVIER CENTONZO

The **PARK PROMISING YOUNG PROFESSIONAL AWARD** recognizes Park University alumni who show exceptional promise of leadership and contribution to their profession and/or community.

The idea of becoming an attorney once seemed nearly impossible to Javier Centonzo, '09, J.D., LL.M. But that was before advocating for veterans became his life's mission.

Born in San Juan, Puerto Rico, Centonzo grew up in Kansas City, Kan. "My mom was a nurse who tirelessly cared for the elderly, poor and disabled. She instilled in me the importance of helping others," he said. "She's my role model."

Despite their efforts, Centonzo said the American dream receded from their reach. By 10th grade, he left high school and entered the Job Corps program before earning a GED diploma and joining the U.S. Marine Corps. "As a first-generation American, I wanted to serve my country. I didn't want people to say my family and I didn't belong here."

HONORING SACRIFICE

After serving his first enlistment, Centonzo returned to Kansas City where he worked for Union Pacific Railroad as a conductor and locomotive engineer. Missing the military camaraderie, he joined the Kansas Army National Guard. During training, Centonzo befriended a former Marine, Sgt. Jessie Davila.

Just before their unit deployed for Iraq, Davila was moved to another squad and ultimately stationed in a different part of the country than Centonzo. Three months into their tour, the reality of war hit Centonzo hard. An improvised explosive device detonated, killing Davila. "It was that day — the day Jessie died — that I decided to honor his sacrifice by making it my life's mission to become a lawyer and advocate for veterans," Centonzo said. "I knew it was a long shot. But to fail would betray those like Jessie who didn't get the chance to pursue their dreams."

Centonzo earned his undergraduate degree from Park University in 2009, graduating summa cum laude in just

over two years while also serving as president of the Park Student Government Association. Prior to graduating, he helped the University secure a \$100,000 Success for Veterans Award Grant from the American Council on Education and the Walmart Foundation. The funds helped create the Park Global Warrior Center to provide assistance to military students, veterans and their families.

IT'S ABOUT THEM

With a full scholarship to Stetson University College of Law in Gulfport, Fla., Centonzo graduated with a Juris Doctorate in 2012, and in 2014, he completed a Master of Laws degree in elder law.

As co-founder and partner in the law firm of Weylie Centonzo PLLC, in St. Petersburg, Fla., Centonzo lives his mission every day. His firm advocates for veterans, the disabled, the elderly and people who are injured due to the negligence of others. He extends his life's mission as a volunteer for the Tragedy Assistance Program for Survivors, Project Homeless Connect, Veterans Pro Bono Consortium and Stand Down for Homeless Veterans. He founded the Heroes Weekend event honoring veterans in Gulfport and created the Sgt. Jessie Davila Memorial Veterans Scholarship to offer financial assistance to veterans pursuing a law degree at Stetson University.

"I'm fortunate to have made it back home. Now I want to do everything I can to make sure we don't neglect veterans," he said. As for his accomplishments, Centonzo is adamant: "It's never been about me. It's about them — the veterans. The more we focus on veterans, the more we understand their issues — homelessness, legal issues, family issues — the better we can serve them." 