

James J. Florio, Trenton State College/The College of New Jersey, Class of 1962

May 2017



Former Governor James Florio was – and still is – renowned in New Jersey and throughout the country, as a tough-minded and principled fighter, fearless in his determination to do the right thing for his fellow citizens, no matter what the political consequences. He never cowered in the corner during his term as governor (1990-1994) when it came to confronting the so-called third-rail political challenges, such as tax increases; an assault weapons ban; and extensive land preservation and environmental protection measures. Appropriately, he received the 1993 *Profile in Courage Award* from the John F. Kennedy Library Foundation. Some cite the time he spent as an amateur boxer as an important influence on his character.

Believing in the value of all life's experiences, Gov. Florio, however, cites the time he spent as a student at Trenton State College (TSC) as key to his professional and personal development. Having since changed its name to The College of New Jersey, the college gave Gov. Florio, who graduated in 1962, the confidence and intellectual tools to succeed in life without boxing gloves.

“My time at college provided me with so much more than job training, it provided the skills to think critically, develop strategies, make decisions based on research from academic sources as well as from conversations with students and faculty,” he said.

Although a practicing attorney and founding partner of the law firm Florio, Perrucci, Steinhardt and Fader, his professional life has been dominated by public policy and public service roles. They

include not only serving as governor, but also as U.S. Congressman from New Jersey's First District (1975-1990), NJ State Assembly member (1970-1974), solicitor for the New Jersey towns of Runnemede, Wood-Lynne, and Somerdale (1969-1974), and assistant city attorney for the City of Camden Legal Department (1967-1971). When his term as governor ended, Gov. Florio was appointed University Professor for Public Policy and Administration at the Edward J. Bloustein School at Rutgers University. He imparts his wisdom in the classroom on various aspects of state and federal public policy to graduate and undergraduate students, as well as to the general public through frequent op-ed columns in state and national media outlets.

"My interest in serving society in some sort of public policy role definitely was heightened by my college experience," said the governor. He acknowledged being fascinated by many areas of study, including English literature, Russian history, American history, earth sciences, and geology, but it was running for student government president that ultimately persuaded him to pursue a career as an elected government official.

"I ran for student government president on a platform of wanting to improve the quality of speakers coming to campus to address the students." He pledged to help attract the intellectual giants, such as: Alexander Kerensky (Russian lawyer and key political figure in the Russian Revolution of 1917 and living in New York during Florio's time at college); Norman Thomas (an American minister, socialist, pacifist, and six-time presidential candidate for the Socialist Party of America); John Hope Franklin (American historian and outspoken intellectual, known for his work *From Slavery to Freedom*, first published in 1947; and Arnold J. Toynbee (British historian, philosopher of history and research professor, known for his work *A Study of History*, first published in 1934).

"I sensed that I was not the only one who felt this way. My campaign strategy focused on more than gaining the support of the so-called popular 'in' crowd at the student union ... I made an effort to talk to as many individual students as possible in a variety of settings." The governor instinctively sensed the value of "retail politics," face-to-face communication, reaching out to people and reaffirming their value as individuals by listening to what his college colleagues had to say. As a result, people supported what he had to say about his vision for college life.

Just a few years earlier, the idea of a "college life" was a foreign concept to Jim Florio and his parents. Brooklyn-born and raised, Jim Florio at the age of 17 quit high school and joined the Navy, then obtained a high school equivalency diploma, continued boxing as an amateur, and never contemplated college. He figured he would pursue a career as a New York City policeman.

But his parents moved from Brooklyn to New Jersey – a move that serendipitously had a profound effect on his life. It was a Jersey-based family friend who sent Jim an application to Trenton State College. He received it while stationed in Kodiak, Alaska. "Maybe it was the cold, dark, long nights that got me thinking 'why not' – and shortly before I was scheduled to leave the Navy, I sent my application to Trenton State."

With an annual tuition cost of \$150, plus his GI Bill stipend of \$70 per month, Jim Florio, who was four years older than his classmates, was able to pay his tuition and living expenses. "The whole college experience was brand new to me. Initially, it was a difficult adjustment, but I had help. Professor Hugh Ford, my English professor, did a great job teaching me the meaning of *Moby Dick* on different levels, but also took the time to explain what was expected of me as a college student," whose existence was far different than that of a naval officer. With the counsel and mentorship of

Professor Ford, Trenton State College student Jim Florio adapted and thrived, graduating magna cum laude.

“My four years at TSC gave me an incredibly strong foundation for continued learning,” said Gov. Florio who did graduate work in American history and government at Columbia University in 1962-1963, before earning a J.D. from Rutgers University Law School in Camden in 1967 and being admitted to the New Jersey bar later that year.

He spoke passionately not only about the value of a college education, but also the challenges faced by college presidents and administrators trying to provide a high-quality education like the one he received at an affordable price. He noted that New Jersey, when he was governor, provided the senior public colleges 75 percent of their operating budgets. Now that percentage averages between 12 and 15 percent.

“The top administrators at public colleges and universities should be focused on educating students, rather than fundraising an important activity, but it should not be the dominant one,” said Gov. Florio. He knows the senior public college and universities have been fiscally creative in establishing partnerships with the private sector and with each other, as a way to provide academic excellence while keeping tuition and fee increases at a minimum.

One specific partnership he would like the public colleges and universities to pursue more vigorously, a university/K-12 collaboration in the communities that are hosting the universities. Gov. Florio is concerned about the cost to the colleges of providing remedial education. He thinks that an approach to solving the problem would be to have the four-year institutions integrate into their curricula more opportunities to connect with local elementary and secondary schools to give young students the encouragement, inspiration, and skills to succeed in college.

“I benefitted from a mentor at Trenton State College – we need to grow the mentorship concept and multiply the benefits,” said the man who always will answer the bell as a knockout of a mentor to his students and professional associates.