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Quiet giant of Massachusetts criminal defense bar dies at 79



Criminal defense attorney John H. LaChance (COURTESY OF DANIEL LACHANCE)

## Quiet giant of Massachusetts criminal defense bar dies at 79

Kris Olson (<https://masslawyersweekly.com/author/kris-olson/>)  
2026 // 4 Minute Read

**Quiet giant of Massachusetts criminal defense bar dies at 79**  
In brief Served as amicus counsel in the high-profile John Salvi competency proceedings following the 1994 Brookline clinic shootings Represented organized crime figure Robert F. "Bobby Russo" Carrozza in Worcester... You can read the content in details following link <https://masslawyersweekly.com/2026/03/06/john-h-lachance-massachusetts-criminal-defense-attorney-dies/>

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- Served as amicus counsel in the high-profile John Salvi competency proceedings following the 1994 Brookline clinic shootings
- Represented organized crime figure Robert F. "Bobby Russo" Carrozza in Worcester federal court's longest criminal trial
- Former president of the Massachusetts Association of [Criminal Defense](https://masslawyersweekly.com/tag/criminal-defense/?taxo-tag-body) (https://masslawyersweekly.com/tag/criminal-defense/?taxo-tag-body) Lawyers
- Recipient of the Edward J. Duggan Private Counsel Award for zealous advocacy on behalf of indigent defendants

**John H. LaChance** (https://masslawyersweekly.com/tag/john-h-lachance/?taxo-tag-body) may not have been the most bombastic criminal defense attorney to ever set foot in a Massachusetts courtroom, but that may have been part of his superpower, say those who practiced alongside him.

LaChance died on Feb. 21 from complications of a series of strokes. He was 79.

LaChance may be best known for serving as amicus counsel for John Salvi following the fatal shootings of Shannon Lowney and Lee Ann Nichols at two Brookline health clinics in 1994.

Boston criminal defense attorney J.W. Carney Jr. says he and co-counsel Janice Bassil recognized early in the case that their defense was going to focus on insanity.

"John [Salvi] had hundreds of public supporters who urged John to fire Janice and me and go pro se," Carney recalls.

The court called on LaChance to serve in the potentially uncomfortable role of engaging in "false advocacy," mounting an argument that contradicted Salvi's wishes.

At the end of a four-day competency hearing before Norfolk Superior Court Judge Barbara A. Dortch-Okara, LaChance contended in his closing argument that the prosecution had not met its burden of establishing Salvi's competency by a preponderance of the evidence.

Doctors who had examined Salvi had determined that the defendant "displayed no anxiety about his situation at all" despite being charged with two counts of murder and "umpteen" counts of assault with attempt to commit murder, LaChance stressed.

"John LaChance played the role perfectly and then faded into the wainscoting of the ancient courtroom," Carney says.

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LaChance was one of the most well-liked members of the bar and the rare attorney who managed all types of criminal cases in Massachusetts, according to Carney.

"He could be found in the morning in District Court, handling an operating-under-the-influence trial, and later in a murder case in the Superior Court," Carney says. "He would be handling an evidentiary hearing in the early afternoon, and he would end his day before a federal judge."

LaChance also represented Joseph Druce, who was serving a life sentence when he was charged with killing defrocked priest John Geoghan at the Souza-Baranowski Correctional Center in Shirley.

But LaChance's most arduous success story may have been representing the lead defendant in what retired criminal defense attorney Peter L. Ettenberg notes is the longest criminal trial in the history of the Worcester federal court.

LaChance represented Robert F. "Bobby Russo" Carrozza, a "capo" in the Patriarca crime family and would-be successor to Francis J. "Cadillac Frank" Salemme. Carrozza was "very involved" in the defense, according to Ettenberg, who represented one of the other nine defendants in the case.

**Despite the pressures of the multi-month trial, LaChance brought a "sense of serenity" to a defense team whose members were trying to represent defendants who each had their lives on the line and who had different views on how to defend the charges, says another of the lawyers, Martin G. Weinberg of Boston.**

**Weinberg and LaChance favored trying to demonstrate to the jury that the government had built its case on a foundation of purchased informant testimony, while others believed they should be pushing a more affirmative defense centered on FBI misconduct, Weinberg explains.**

**Thanks in no small part to LaChance's equanimity, the lawyers and their clients ironed out their differences, and they were able to mount a successful joint defense.**

**Closing arguments were held the week before Christmas, and most court watchers were expecting a verdict by no later than the day before the holiday, Weinberg recalls. Yet the jury continued to deliberate through both the Christmas and New Year's holidays before finally reporting to the judge that they were at an impasse. After U.S. District Court Judge Nathaniel M. Gorton declared a mistrial, a few of the defendants were tried again, but others resolved the charges against them, according to Weinberg.**

**One should not overlook that LaChance had been appointed to represent Carrozza, Weinberg says.**

**"It's one thing when you're selected and retained, and your client has a certain amount of intuitive confidence that they selected you from the community of criminal defense lawyers. But it's another challenge when the court appoints counsel for you," he says. "John just handled it all — all the pressures, all of the legal challenges, all of the courtroom challenges, all of the group dynamics — with great judgment, great stability."**

**Indeed, the only bit of lawyering that Weinberg has seen that rivals what he witnessed from LaChance in the Carrozza trial was when Kenneth J. Fishman was appointed to represent Boston mobster Stephen "The Rifleman" Flemmi.**

**Fishman went on to serve nearly 20 years as a Superior Court judge, and LaChance could have done likewise, Weinberg believes.**

**"He had that kind of temperament and judgment and sense of fairness that would have made an excellent judge," he says.**

Retired criminal defense attorney Eileen D. Agnes had a similar experience working alongside LaChance on a murder trial in which LaChance was second chair.

Agnes calls LaChance a "terrific trial lawyer and a gentleman." LaChance and his wife, Karen, who predeceased him, remained friends with Agnes and her husband, former Appeals Court Judge Peter W. Agnes Jr., even after their legal practices diverged, she says.

But more than the cases that grabbed the headlines, LaChance's career was "defined by a commitment to those the system overlooks," according to his obituary. The Committee for Public Counsel Services bestowed upon him the Edward J. Duggan Private Counsel Award "for zealous advocacy and outstanding legal services to the poor" in 1991. He was also a former president of the Massachusetts Association of Criminal Defense Lawyers.

"I never knew the guy to say no to almost anything or anybody," says Leominster criminal defense attorney Edward P. Ryan Jr.

He adds: "It's a shame that young lawyers of today couldn't have seen him work, because in an afternoon or a case with John, they would have learned an awful lot about the practice of law. He was just a terrific human being."

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