

Pacifica Business Neighbor Mike Romano

Deeply good insurance agent is also fathomless, magical storyteller

By JEAN BARTLETT | THE WEEK OF 6-25-18-7-1-18



(Jean Bartlett photo)

Mike Romano and his granddaughter Isla in the author's home garden.

Since 1988, Mike Romano has been an agent for Farmers Insurance in Pacifica. His office is located in the shoreline area of Rockaway Beach and he's a fountain of knowledge about all the coverage options – auto, home, renters, business insurance and more. Many of his clients date back to when he first opened his doors and some before that. When he worked in car sales, he sold his client Peggy Ann her first truck. When he ran Pacifica Home Satellite, Peggy Ann bought her first satellite dish from him, and when he ran Romano's Meats, she was stocking her fridge with his products. Not long ago, Peggy Ann and her husband moved upstate, near the Oregon border, and they did not want to shop for new insurance locally. Mike is still their guy.

A walk into his Rockaway office is a curiosity of treasures. Decorations include movie memorabilia, interesting artwork and absorbing collectibles. There are also several shelves filled with his published books to date – 18 of them. He has two more coming out within the next 60 days. He has 56 finished books that are yet to be published and the number of books he has yet to write, he cannot count. These stories flow out of him. Most of them he doesn't even know are brewing inwardly until he is awakened at 2:30 a.m. with an idea. Then he gets up and gets typing. The day before this interview, he pounded out 15 pages of a story, some of which is revealed here.

"These two members of the U.S. military, buddies, land in Laos or Cambodia, I can't remember which," he winked. "I only started writing it yesterday."

The two are a part of the 50 Marines dropped out of helicopters at the book's start. Per their assignment, they run up over the hill where they meet the unplanned part, 700 trained members of the other side. A battle ensues which leads the two men to an interesting find. Decades later, that "find" will send these men into the pages of a Romano thriller yarn of horror and heroism, and some laughs, on the streets of San Francisco.

Mike's own story begins in New York where he was born.

"My father was an incredible tailor. He worked for a large company in New York and one of their contracts was making the coonskin caps for Disney. When I was 6 at most, I remember leaping into a big pile of these hats, maybe 30 feet wide and 15 feet tall. Heaven!"

When he was 10, he moved with his family to East Los Angeles. His mom had severe rheumatoid arthritis and her doctor advised West Coast weather as necessary medicine. His dad went to work as an awning maker and his mom became a manager for The Good Guys, a former (chain) consumer electronics store.

"When we were kids we had a mimeograph machine and we created a town newspaper – The El Sereno Voice. It was six pages, three sheets folded over. We charged two cents apiece and made money.

"I've always been able to make money. My brother had a box of buffalo nickels. I was the salesman. '20 cents apiece or nine for two dollars,' I told customers. One guy says to me, 'Why should I give you \$2 for nine?' 'Because with nine you get a choice,' I responded. 'Well okay,' the guy said."

Mike was an explorer scout in East LA. His scout master was a doctor and their troop was the "medical" troop. He liked the medical stuff and took a lot of science in school. When he was 16, his dad died. When he was 18 and a half, he went to his local U.S. Navy recruitment office to sign up. He loved his family but hated East LA and figured the Navy was a good ticket out.

"This is during Vietnam. I had just signed up to be in the Navy and I go home and find my draft notice. I go back to the Navy the next day and show them the notice. And they say, 'We're sorry son, we can't help you because they got you. But just wondering, what did you want to be in the Navy?' And I said, 'corpsman,' and they said, 'come this way.'"

"The enemy shoots the corpsman first," Romano noted. "You see the Marines are taught that nothing can hurt you because you are a Marine. But if you are hurt, don't worry, Doc can fix you. That's why the corpsmen were targeted, to demoralize the Marines they were with. I'll tell you, the Marines took care of me."

Romano – whose uncle was a WWII corpsman stationed at Pearl Harbor – served a couple of years in the Navy, with 21 months as a corpsman in the Marines. When he came home he went to work for Glendale Ambulance. When he was offered a job in 1974 with San Francisco Ambulance, he left Southern California. He was the first licensed paramedic in California. "Anywhere," he said.

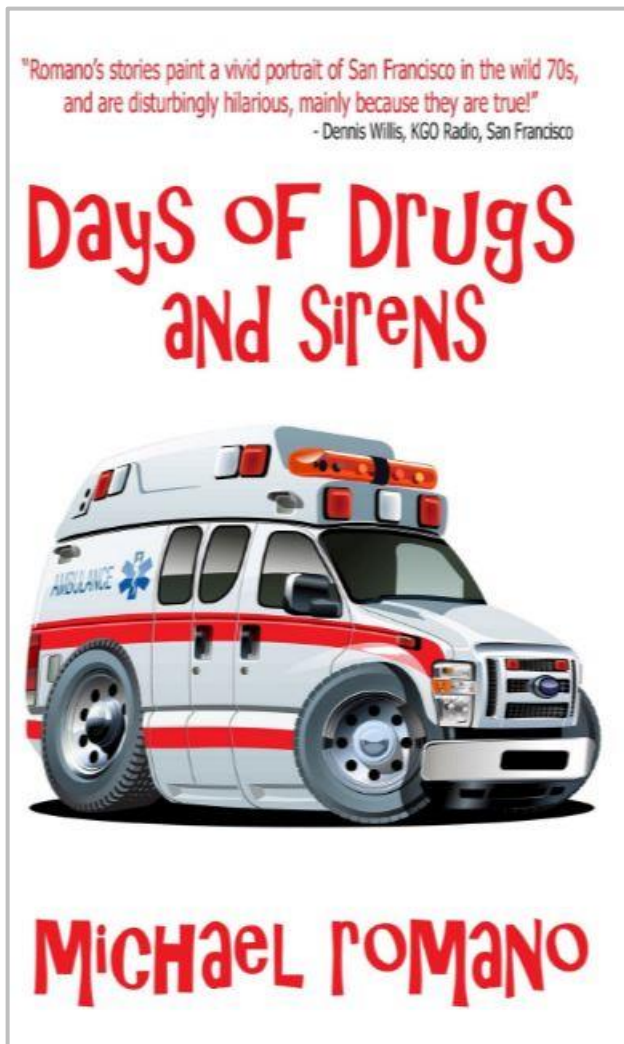
"I rode to San Francisco on my Triumph 650 motorcycle. I had two small carpet bags and \$194 in cash."

The woman behind the front desk of San Francisco Ambulance was extremely busy, knew nothing about his hiring and was generally unimpressed. They got along immediately and she is one of his 30-year insurance clients.

"I made \$3.48 an hour and I could work as many hours as I could stay awake. I had no overtime and no holidays." There are 168 hours in a week. Romano still has a paycheck stub for 142 hours.

He then went to work for City Ambulance with a quadruple pay hike - \$13 an hour. That was good money, but the work was taxing and the rules were not clearly defined. Both issues eventually drove him out.

"I was in a gunfight," he recalled with a laugh. "This guy was on PCP and crank. He shot his mother, lunged her, and she was a big woman, 6 feet tall, 450 pounds. He's in a burned-out building and our old Cadillac ambulance is taking hits. He is shooting at us a lot. My partner and I, and we're both big boys, we dragged the mom into the ambulance. We plugged the hole in her lungs and fired back. My partner jumps up with his .41 Magnum, shoots six times and can't hit the building. I had this new 15-shot Beretta. I started running at him and I shot 15 times and hit him 11 times, but I didn't kill him. Later, I'm standing before the shooting board, my captain is there, and the judge goes, 'Boy, why did you shoot this gentleman 11 times?' I was 24 and stupid, and I said, 'Because I ran out of ammo.' I was charged with contempt of court and run out of the courtroom. But I didn't lose my job!"



Many of Romano's days as a paramedic in San Francisco's "wild and crazy" days of the early 1970s, are chronicled in his book "Days of Drugs and Sirens." The book also includes a sweet tale of love, his own, when he met his future wife Joanne. She was a medical assistant then. Mike got the emergency call to the West Portal doctor's office where she worked. A guy Mike knew, in fact he was almost a regular because he had chronic congestive heart failure, was lying on the floor in the reception area. Mike saw "this cute curly-haired brunette medical assistant" and it was love at first sight – and the patient lived too. Mike and Joanne have been married 42 years, are the parents of three and the grandparents of ten. Joanne works with Mike at their Farmers' office.

Sitting down to interview Mike is a wonderfully segueing-stream of true "stuff." There was the time his buddy told him about a really nice Mercedes for sale and Mike headed off to the home of its owner, Shirley Temple Black.

"She has a big arched door, with multi-color bricks, just like in her movie about the Blue Bird of Happiness. When she opened the door to me – someone who is not afraid to speak to anyone – I instantly realized that she was my hero and my vocabulary became limited to 'blah, blah.'"

"Here's a story," he continued. "The first time I got hurt in Vietnam, I was flown to the hospital at the Kadena Air Base in Japan. On the plane to the hospital, I'm on a stretcher, everything is bandaged including my face, and I've got an IV going. I see this really good looking nurse and I said, 'How about a dance?' Her name is Kathy and she tells me when I get better we'll dance. Eight months later, I'm flying to the hospital again and this time I am really damaged. I'm on the plane with just one eye open and I have two IVS going. I see Kathy again. I said, 'Are you stalking me?' Twenty years later, I'm in

Pacifica and I see this woman and we walk around each other, trying to figure out who the other person is. Then we realize, she was the nurse and I was the patient. So I brought her home to meet Joanne. Joanne has heard so many of my stories that they go in and out of her ears like twine! But suddenly, my story has come to life. Kathy told Joanne the second time she saw me, she thought I was dead! What are the odds she'd walk through our front door in Pacifica? What are the odds that she and her husband were longtime Pacifica residents? They've since moved, however."

The former paramedic then discussed his mother's ancestors.

"My mother spoke five languages and her family line includes the Habsburg's, so there are some Roman emperors in the family tree, along with a number of queens, including Marie Antoinette."

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"One night I had an appointment with a new client and a couple of royalty-type guards come in, and I could tell they are packing. Then the Crown Prince of Lichtenstein walks in. The Prince had discovered my Habsburg connection and wanted to talk to me about insuring a medical product, if it could get past this country's approval process, which it did

not in the long run. But he and I got along fine."

Romano's number one European of all time is his idol Hans Christian Andersen. He was introduced to Andersen's fairy tales by his parents and his uncle when he was little, and he has never lost his love for those childhood page-turners. Like Andersen, Romano's prolific writings cover a gamut of topics, but often focus on fairy tales. His children and his grandchildren inspire his stories. His granddaughter Isla, visiting the day of this interview, is a huge fan of the "Little Witch" series she inspired, as is this writer.

"I finally have a story for my son Josh," the proud dad enthused. "It's my favorite story." (Note, having interviewed Mike numerous times now, it is understood that each book he writes is his favorite.)

The story, soon to be out in print, is titled, "My Dad The Inventor." It takes its readers back to the year 1001; to Rome.

"It's about a kid whose father was a repairman back in that day. People leave off things outside his home to be repaired and also leave coins in his basket. It's all the honor system and he makes a good living at it. In his spare time, he's inventing. Because he was a medic in the war, he knows things that he learned from other countries, like, how to lay a hot iron across a wound and sear it and how to help a drowning victim. He's got a hidden cave way up the hill from his house where he keeps his tools and his notebook. His son will follow in his footsteps, creating things that who would even know were a thought back in that year. Everybody lives to a ripe old age. Several centuries later, oh about 1462, a family buys this little home on the outskirts of Rome. One day, their son, Leonardo, discovers this cave and the notebook and all these unbelievable tools. Funny how something somebody did so long ago can affect things for the better, hundreds of years later."

The thing about this insurance man is he could be interviewed 100 times and each time it's a new story.

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Jean Bartlett is a longtime Bay Area features writer: Pacifica Tribune, Oakland Tribune, San Jose Mercury, San Mateo Times, Portraits & Roots, Marin Independent Journal, Twin City Times, Ross Valley Reporter, Peninsula Progress, Coastal Connections, Contra Costa County Times, Bay Area Business Woman and Catholic San Francisco.