

Gerald R. Ford— Accidental Hero



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So much has been said and written about Gerald R. Ford since his death in December. Many have called him the “accidental president.” I don’t believe it was any accident that Gerald R. Ford became our president. Nor do I think that his actions in moving to pardon Richard M. Nixon (and thereby almost guaranteeing his defeat in the 1976 presidential race) were anything other than those of a true public servant who put the interests of his country ahead of everything else.

Gerald R. Ford was a hero—many think his actions after Watergate saved this country from one of its most monumental crises. I don’t believe Gerald Ford would consider himself a hero—he was just doing his job. What I do find amazing is how many of our members here at the State Bar of Michigan undertake truly heroic actions every day and consider it to be just part of their jobs.

Every day, legal aid lawyers go to work and earn a lot less money than they could or than they are truly worth to ensure that the poor and the working poor have access to the courts. They are heroes. Every day, criminal defense attorneys defend those who are accused, and are often scorned by the public for doing so. They are heroes. Other attorneys spend time representing children, the elderly, those with an unpopular cause, or a client without the resources to adequately defend himself. They are heroes. Family law attorneys exhort their clients to put the interests of their children first, even when it means giving 100 percent, because 50 percent just wouldn’t be fair to those children. They are heroes. Judges volunteer to organize drug courts and sobriety courts and to take their courtrooms to the classrooms to help those who appear before them and their communities,

and they are heroes. Every day, members of the State Bar leave their offices and go on to one more volunteer activity—they are Scout masters, Brownie troop leaders, basketball coaches, Sunday school teachers, and field trip organizers, and they are all heroes.

Every day, members of our profession go to work and make difficult decisions, because it is the right thing to do. Every day, we counsel our clients to do the right thing, even if it is personally difficult for us and for them. Every day, we act as zealous

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advocates for our clients, and our opposing counsel might be our adversaries, but they are not our enemies. Every day, we are surrounded by heroes in this profession, even if they are unheralded and unacknowledged.

Now please don’t take this as a Pollyannaish look at our world or our profession. I read the newspapers. I get the phone calls. (Boy, do I get the phone calls!) I’ve sat and reviewed claims against our Client Protection Fund, and it’s a sobering thing. I just believe that when you look at the profession as a whole, you find a heck of a lot more heroes among us than villains.

I do admit to being confused as to why the national media’s expectations for

public figures are so low. Since when did doing the right thing make you a hero? How sad that this is so rare as to make it worth mentioning as part of a president’s funeral. (And since when did being from the Midwest make one “nice”? I guess it’s a better automatic coupling than “corn fed” or “parochial.”)

Gerald R. Ford was the consummate Michigan man. (And despite what you are thinking, I’m not just talking about his letterman and football MVP status at the University of Michigan!) Even though some criticized him for having retirement homes in Colorado and California and not physically returning to Michigan, he was always a Grand Raptidian and Michiganiaan. He never missed a chance to boost Michigan and its economy. When it came time to locate his library and museum, he put his library in Ann Arbor, with its easy access to academia, and his museum and burial place in Grand Rapids, so that each of these cities that were so much a part of him would benefit in prestige and tourism, as well as economically.

Of course, not all of us will be president of the United States or a congressman or even a public servant in the traditional sense of the word. But each of us can celebrate the heroes among us. Not each of us will have the opportunity to practice law with a future president, but we each practice law with heroes. Not each of us will have the opportunity to advise a president on the most important legal issues of our time, but each of us will help advise our clients on the most important legal issues they will ever face.

I hope as you take some time to review the tribute honoring Gerald R. Ford in this issue of the *Michigan Bar Journal*, that you take some time to honor the heroes in your life. ■