

What Justice Looks Like

By Samuel Damren, published by Fifth Avenue Press,
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Available at <https://www.samueldamren.com/>, Amazon Books, and Kindle



Reviewed by Amanda A. Page

For our multilayered justice system to function, all parties involved must work to ensure that checks and balances are in place to protect both victims and the accused. Society expects the justice system to work and relies on the assumption that guilty criminals will be convicted and the accused who are innocent will be exonerated. As Daniel Webster long ago observed:

Justice, sir, is the great interest of man on Earth. It is the ligament which holds civilized beings and civilized nations together.¹

A real-life slice of the subject of justice is examined in *What Justice Looks Like*. Samuel Damren provides insight into what it takes to ensure that the justice system works and what it looks like when the system fails. For lawyers, the book is a technically informative and dramatic retelling of two high-profile criminal cases—the prosecution of a vicious “hit man” and the setting aside of the conviction of an innocent young man. It is also a thoughtful, personal narrative through which nonlawyers gain first-person insight into the actual workings of the criminal justice system.

Damren has a deep understanding of human behavior and a unique cadence of storytelling. His commitment to the justice system’s success is evident by his stellar, wholehearted roles as both prosecutor and defense attorney. Damren’s theory of a successful justice system is two-fold: it must convict the “worst of the worst” fairly within the rules, and it must have the integrity to face its own fallibilities when things go wrong. As Damren stated to me when discussing his book, “the real foundation of the

successful criminal justice system is trust. Citizens must trust that the criminal justice system will protect them from acts of others and trust they will not be falsely accused and prosecuted.”

By looking at two different criminal cases from one attorney’s point of view at two different times in his career, the author first uses the “silenced voices” of victims to vividly describe each crime as it occurred and then provides an in-depth exploration of the investigations and trials that followed.

Damren started out prosecuting individuals accused of violent crimes in Wayne County before transitioning to private practice for most of his career. His philosophy as a prosecutor and in his career was guided by integrity. The first case discussed in *What Justice Looks Like* centers on a cold-hearted killer and how against all odds justice was able to deliver a conviction. Arthur Burgess was a career criminal; the author describes him as if he felt he was immune to justice and had no emotions toward his victims. In the press at the time, Burgess was called the “Most Dangerous Man Alive.” Damren’s recreation of the crime scene of a 1974 triple murder in Dearborn makes readers feel as if they were there and the terror the victims must have experienced. The author then ex-

plains his trial strategy and how it played out in fact in a manner that is both accessible and gripping for lawyers and nonlawyers alike.

Forty years later, as he was preparing for retirement, Damren was asked to act as lead counsel for a 2016 defense team seeking to exonerate Davontae Sanford, who had been convicted eight years earlier as a 14-year-old for a quadruple homicide in Detroit that he did not commit. The second half of *What Justice Looks Like* details Davontae’s case and how the system initially failed him. His story is retold in a way that puts the reader right there on that dark, early morning in 2007 when he was picked up by the police and held as a minor without the supervision of his mother. After many hours of questioning, Davontae falsely confessed. His trial lawyer proved inept, and Davontae pled guilty to second-degree murder midway through trial. Evidence of his innocence soon became apparent, but his initial appellate lawyers fumbled the effort to obtain a new trial.

Ultimately, after Davontae spent years in prison, his case was taken up by a new defense team. The defense team was experienced, but given the highly charged nature of the case in the national and local press, felt they needed a “closer” to present the case

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in court, which is how Damren became involved. Once on board in that role, Damren successfully worked with police and prosecutors to vacate Davontae's sentence and dismiss all charges. There is much more to Davontae's case for the reader to explore. I was so intrigued that I did a little digging online and found old press conferences given by Wayne County Prosecutor Kym Worthy and a 2016 State Police report detailing the investigation leading to Davontae's exoneration. It is truly upsetting that a case like this went on for so long without the justice system's intervening on behalf of the innocent.

The two cases discussed in *What Justice Looks Like* provide the foundation for Damren to posit that for the justice system to work, all parts must work in unison. He gives insight into his trial strategies and case management both as a prosecutor and in his role as defense attorney. Damren explains why he called certain witnesses to the stand, how their testimony would help support his case, and the risks those witnesses took by coming forward. He exposes the underbelly of the justice system where police misconduct can lead to a wrongful conviction and the code by which criminals live. He brings to life how bystanders can become collateral damage both to criminal acts and to the justice system itself.

What Justice Looks Like piqued my curiosity regarding the seemingly basic concept of justice, largely due to Damren's ability to put the reader into the mind of Burgess and the injustice worked on Davontae Sanford. His behind-the-scenes look at the justice system allows the reader to understand what it takes for the system to work—and what it looks like when it doesn't. *What Justice Looks Like* also gives the reader an appreciation of how razor thin the difference can be between cases working out as they should and cases not working out as they should. ■

Amanda A. Page, Esq. is the owner of Page Law, PLLC, located in Southfield. Her practice is dedicated to consumer bankruptcy law. She is a member of the SBM Michigan Bar Journal Committee.

ENDNOTE

1. Attorney Daniel Webster comments at the funeral of United States Supreme Court Justice Joseph Story (September 12, 1845).



Meeting Directory

Lawyers and Judges Alcoholics Anonymous and Narcotics Anonymous

The following list of meetings reflects the latest information about lawyers and judges AA and NA meetings. Those meetings marked with “*” are meetings that have been designated for lawyers, judges, and law students only. All other meetings are attended primarily by lawyers, judges, and law students, but also are attended by others seeking recovery. In addition, we have listed “Suggested Meetings,” which others in recovery have recommended as being good meetings for those in the legal profession. For questions about any of the meetings listed, please contact the Lawyers and Judges Assistance Program at (800) 996-5522 or jclark@michbar.org.

Alcoholics Anonymous Meetings

***Monday 7:00 PM**
Lawyers and Judges AA Meeting
St. Paul of the Cross
23333 Schoolcraft Rd.
(I-96 south service drive, just east of Telegraph Rd.)
Detroit
(This is both an AA and NA meeting.)

***Tuesday 7:00 PM**
Lawyers and Judges AA Meeting
St. John's Episcopal Church
26998 Woodward Ave.
Royal Oak

***Wednesday 12:00 PM**
First Presbyterian Church
321 W. South St., 3rd Floor
Room 301
Kalamazoo

***Wednesday 6:00 PM**
Kirk in the Hills Presbyterian Church
1340 W. Long Lake Rd.
(1/2 mile west of Telegraph)
Bloomfield Hills

Wednesday 8:00 PM
Sense of Humor AA Meeting
Michigan State University Union
Lake Michigan Room
(S.E. corner of Abbot and Grand River Ave.)
East Lansing

***Thursday 4:00 PM**
Al-Anon of Berrien County
4162 Red Arrow Highway
Stevensville

***Thursday 7:00 PM**
Central Methodist Church, 2nd Floor
(Corner of Capitol and Ottawa Streets)
Lansing

***Thursday 7:30 PM**
Maple Grove
6773 W. Maple Rd.
Willingness Group, Room 21
West Bloomfield Township

***Second Saturday of the Month 1:00 PM**
Lawyers and Judges AA Meeting
Houghton Lake Alano Club
2410 N. Markey Rd.
Houghton Lake
(Contact Scott at (989) 246-1200 with questions)

Gamblers Anonymous Meetings

For a list of meetings, visit <http://www.gamblersanonymous.org/mtgdirMI.html>. Please note that these meetings are not specifically for lawyers and judges.

Suggested Meetings

Tuesday 7:00 AM
Antioch Lutheran Church
33360 W. 13 Mile
(Corner of 13 Mile and Farmington Rd., use back/north entrance, basement)
Farmington Hills

Tuesday 12:05 PM
Professionals in Recovery
Human Potential Center
22 W. 2nd St.
Monroe
(Closed meeting; restricted to professionals who are addicted to drugs and/or alcohol)

Tuesday 6:00 PM
St. Aloysius Church Office
1232 Washington Blvd.
Detroit

**Thursday 8:00 PM
(also Sunday 8:00 PM)**
Manresa Stag
1390 Quarton Rd.
Bloomfield Hills

Friday 12:00 PM
Detroit Metropolitan Bar Association
645 Griswold
3550 Penobscot Bldg., 13th Floor
Smart Detroit Global Board Room 2
Detroit

Friday 6:00 PM
The Business & Professional (STAG)
Closed Meeting of Narcotics Anonymous
Pilgrim Congregational Church
3061 N Adams
(2 blocks north of Big Beaver (16 Mile Rd.))
Troy

Friday 8:00 PM
Rochester Presbyterian Church
1385 S. Adams
(South of Avon Rd.)
Rochester
(Closed meeting; men's group)

For anyone interested in starting an LJAA meeting in northern Michigan, please contact LJAP.

For other AA or NA meetings, see listings in your local phone book or call:
Lawyers and Judges Assistance Program, (800) 996-5522