

2020 Michigan State Bar Foundation Awards

By Jennifer Bentley

The Michigan State Bar Foundation honored three awards recipients as part of its virtual annual meeting on September 23.

Two members of the Michigan Supreme Court—**Chief Justice Bridget Mary McCormack** and **Justice Brian K. Zahra**—received the Founders Award, which recognizes lawyers exemplifying professional excellence and outstanding contributions to the community.

“Both award recipients represent the highest traditions of the legal profession,” said MSBF President Ed Pappas. “While each has a wide range of professional achievements and community contributions, particularly gratifying to the foundation is the impact both have made on access to justice.”



Michigan Supreme Court Chief Justice
Bridget Mary McCormack

McCormack was recognized for her leadership on the court during the COVID-19 pandemic and her prioritization of access to justice efforts. She described the significant changes the pandemic forced the state’s courts to make and how it demonstrated that change is possible. McCormack also launched the Justice for All Task Force in 2019, a comprehensive effort to identify gaps in the civil justice system and implement a plan to fill them. She encouraged the Justice for All Task Force “to be bold” when prioritizing initiatives to increase access to justice.



Michigan Supreme Court Justice
Brian K. Zahra

Zahra was honored for leadership as the Supreme Court liaison to the Justice for All Task Force. He described a pro bono case he handled early in his legal career when he helped a single mom stop an improper wage garnishment for a debt she did not owe, and added that the access to justice gap became even more apparent to him when he was elected to the trial bench because he saw litigants in court trying to represent themselves but not knowing what to do. He explained that when you “level the playing field, everything runs more efficiently.”

The foundation also presented **James Keedy** with its Access to Justice Award, presented to someone who significantly advances access to justice for the poor in Michigan. Keedy’s commitment to public interest law spanned more than four decades—including 30 years as director of Michigan Indian Legal Services (MILS) in Traverse City—until his retirement in 2018.



James Keedy

Keedy described the meaningful services MILS provides to Native American tribes and individuals.

The Michigan State Bar Foundation, a tax-exempt charitable organization established in 1947, provides leadership and grants to improve access for all to the justice system, including support for civil legal aid to the poor, law-related education, and conflict resolution. More information about the foundation can be found at www.msbf.org.

Jennifer Bentley is executive director of the Michigan State Bar Foundation.