

# A TIME TO HONOR OUR BEST

## STATE BAR OF MICHIGAN 2021 AWARD WINNERS

By Lynn Patrick Ingram and Mike Eidelbes

The 11 individuals and one group selected as 2021 State Bar of Michigan award winners are as diverse as the Bar membership itself. Among this year's honorees are five women and six men; current and former judges, attorneys from the private and public sector, an educator, and a journalist; members with decades of experience in the profession and a group of law students from the University of Detroit Mercy. One common thread is the exemplary service these honorees have provided to the legal profession.

### Barry Howard Roberts P. Hudson Award

During his 45 years as a member of the State Bar of Michigan, **Barry Howard** was always known as a "lawyer's lawyer" and, later, as a "judge's judge."

Howard spent about 12 years as a circuit court judge in Oakland County and earned a reputation as a "consensus builder who always did the right thing," attorney Peter Alter said in his letter of nomination.

In recent years, the State Bar drew on Howard's talents and influence, tapping him to serve as co-chair of its Judicial Crossroads Task Force and leader on the 21st Century Practice Task Force.

"Indeed, as a member of the 21st Century Task Force, . . . he actively and effectively advanced the Task Force's goal to 'better serve and protect the public in the face of a rapidly evolving profession and potential changes in the delivery of legal services,'" Alter noted.

Oakland County Business Court Judge Jim Alexander said, "When one thinks of Barry Howard, the first word that comes to mind is 'integrity.' He has more in his little finger than most of us have earned in a lifetime."

Former State Bar of Michigan President Ed Pappas, who co-chaired the Judicial Crossroads Task Force with Howard, agreed.

"In every capacity, Barry represents the highest ideals of a lawyer — professionalism, civility, competence, and integrity. Barry's service to the Bar, the legal profession, and the public is unparalleled," Pappas said.

Former Gov. James Blanchard said attorneys are fortunate to count Howard as a colleague. "His work honors all of us in ways that are not only noteworthy, but deserving of our State Bar's highest honor," he said.



### Thomas P. Boyd and James H. Fisher Champion of Justice Award

Former judges **Thomas Boyd** and **James Fisher** will be known in Michigan history as a perfect pair, combining their considerable skills to transform Michigan's indigent defense system for the benefit of future generations.

In addition to being highly respected judges, Boyd and Fisher volunteered hundreds of hours over a seven-year span to develop improvements to Michigan's justice system and its courts. Specifically, the pair have been key leaders of the Michigan Indigent Defense Commission, which worked to develop minimum standards for indigent defense, recommend best practices to local courts, and seek funds to improve these services throughout the state.

Through their efforts, the MIDC obtained an \$86-million appropriation from the state legislature, more than doubling the resources previously allocated and funding dramatic improvements in indigent defense statewide.

In her letter of nomination, 61st District Court Judge Hon. Jennifer Faber noted that because of the work of Boyd and Fisher, "significant reforms are being implemented across the state of Michigan, benefitting not just those charged with crimes, and the lawyers who represent them, but more broadly every citizen who values freedom and justice."



## Hon. Susan L. Dobrich Champion of Justice Award

To say that Cass County Chief Judge **Susan Dobrich** is an innovator is an understatement.

Dobrich advanced a nascent problem-solving court movement in Michigan by starting the state's first family treatment court in 2003, and she didn't stop there.

"Judge Dobrich's leadership on problem-solving courts led to the development of additional problem-solving courts in Cass County," wrote Carol Bealor, Cass County Friend of the Court director and court administrator. Dobrich continued to champion the initiative, fueling the expansion of problem-solving courts statewide.

"The reach of Judge Dobrich's work...has gone far beyond the county boundaries to impact citizens and court professionals throughout Michigan and the United States," wrote Cass County Friend of the Court Attorney Referee Melissa Sytsma.

Michigan Supreme Court Chief Justice Bridget McCormack summed it up best, saying, "Judge Dobrich gives public service a good name. She goes to work every day determined to help people heal, seeing the court as a place where people can get resources, not just consequences. I feel fortunate to get to work with her."

## Ron Frantz Frank J. Kelley Distinguished Public Service Award

To Ottawa County's most vulnerable citizens, **Ron Frantz** was a superhero.

For more than 40 years, Frantz served both Ottawa County and the state of Michigan with distinction, most notably as Ottawa County prosecutor since 1991. In his work, nominators noted Frantz's positive impact on thousands of people and his commitment to specifically protecting those most at risk.

"With a personal passion for protecting the most vulnerable in our community, Mr. Frantz has made a career of fighting to protect children, helping those who have been victims of domestic violence, and assisting victims of crime generally," wrote Paul F. Kraus, president of the Ottawa County Bar Association, in a letter of support.

Known for his professionalism, integrity, and fairness, Frantz has also served tirelessly on a variety of boards and organizations, always looking to make Ottawa County a better place.

"Mr. Frantz is retiring this year after 43 years of selfless dedication, providing exceptional public service," Kraus noted. "The Frank J. Kelley Distinguished Public Service Award is an excellent way to honor this champion of justice."



## Anita Hitchcock Frank J. Kelley Distinguished Public Service Award

Grand Rapids City Attorney **Anita Hitchcock** is on a mission to serve her community.

A staple in city government since 2002, Hitchcock also has served her hometown by volunteering on dozens of committees and task forces, working on election issues, advocating for diversity and inclusion, and even teaching the next generation of law students.

"If you are anywhere near City Hall in Grand Rapids, you will likely see Anita Hitchcock working hard in her office, attending open public meetings, meeting with citizens, or thoughtfully deliberating with other government officials," Hitchcock's colleague, Philip Strom, wrote in a letter of nomination. "She has committed her life to public service and continues to serve the community she grew up in."

Hitchcock's mission, Strom said, is "to make sure the community [is] better at the conclusion of her career than it was at the start." She has succeeded, he said, because she "makes Grand Rapids better every day."

## Heidi A. Naasko John W. Cummiskey Pro Bono Award

**Heidi Naasko** is a gift to the pro bono world.

She serves as Dykema's national pro bono and diversity counsel, where her work includes several significant pro bono cases including representing unaccompanied immigrant children who are victims of human trafficking and domestic violence survivors in divorce cases. She has also been a champion of pro bono work by her firm as well as other firms and attorneys.

Ashley Lowe and Lynda Krupp of Lakeshore Legal Aid, a major beneficiary of Naasko's work, expressed their gratitude for her advocacy.

"Lakeshore, along with the legal aid and pro bono community, value the passion she brings to pro bono work and engaging attorneys in pro bono work," Lowe and Krupp wrote in a letter of nomination. "She is a tireless advocate our clients and deserving of the Cummiskey Award."

In her letter of support, attorney Kim Ray said, "Quite simply, there is a broader network of attorneys providing pro bono service because of Heidi Naasko. Heidi has touched a number of lives, either directly or indirectly, and I wholeheartedly support her nomination for this award."



**Paul Reingold****John W. Reed Michigan Lawyer Legacy Award**

University of Michigan Law School Clinical Professor Emeritus **Paul Reingold** spent his entire career turning students into great lawyers while demonstrating a commitment to teaching matched only by a passion for public interest law.

Reingold spent 30 of his 37 years at U-M Law running the school's litigation clinic, where students litigated cases for indigent clients under his supervision in local district, circuit, probate, and federal courts.

In a letter of nomination, a group of Reingold's colleagues said that "through this work under his guidance, students made marked progress towards becoming ethical, client-centered lawyers."

He is also "a fierce advocate for his client, and a lawyer who prides himself on being able to disagree with opposing counsel without being disagreeable or disrespectful." They also noted that Reingold "helped elevate the practice of law in Michigan by actively giving back to the legal community."

In the end, Reingold's colleagues said they believe that "each of what we estimate to be nearly 1,000 students taught over the course of his career left law school better prepared to practice law, elevating the quality of practice."

**Tim Skubick****Liberty Bell Award**

When it comes to free press and free speech, the legendary **Tim Skubick** stands out. Now in his 50th year of covering Michigan government, he is the longest serving political reporter in state history.

Best known for anchoring the Michigan public television show "Off the Record," Skubick was nominated by Ingham County Bar Association President Charles Barbieri by virtue of a resolution of the ICBA Board.

"Tim has epitomized all that is great about our First Amendment's guarantee of free speech and free press. His civic contributions have reinforced the rule of law, not only locally, but also on a statewide basis," Barbieri said.

Bill Ballenger, former editor of "Inside Michigan Politics," highlighted Skubick's commitment to informing Michigan residents about the importance of the decisions being made by their elected officials. "His insights, and his fairness in addressing all these subjects and issues, has been not only commendable — it's unrivaled," Ballenger said in a letter of support.

Western Michigan University Thomas M. Cooley Distinguished Law Professor Emeritus Otto Stockmeyer said Skubick is deserving of recognition, calling him "the unchallenged dean of Lansing journalism."



**University of Detroit Mercy School of Law Clinical Program, Nicholas Schroek, Hon. Michelle Rick, and Rebecca Simkins Nowak (ATJ — Taking Project Access to Mid-Northern Michigan Expungement Project) Kimberly Cahill Bar Leadership Award**



Sometimes you need to take the show on the road. That's exactly what **Michelle Rick, Rebecca Simkins Nowak, and Nicholas Schroek** did with their expungement project through the University of Detroit Law Clinical Program.

When the group learned that only 6.5% of those eligible for expungement in Michigan had applied to have their records cleared, they dedicated themselves to addressing this massive unmet community need. The trio secured funding, planned diligently, and hit the road with their traveling expungement program.

They took law students to rural counties and worked alongside judges, members of the law enforcement community, volunteer attorneys, and law students to help eligible applicants complete expungement applications. The clinics served approximately 350 low-income individuals and yielded "many positive results relating to increased employment opportunities and a person's well-being in knowing their record is now clear of a mistake," according to the nomination.

Nowak said the nominees "worked tirelessly on this project" and continue to work to raise awareness of expungement and serve this community need.



## Representative Assembly Awards

### Jennifer M. Grieco Michael Franck Award

Attorneys wrapping a stint as State Bar of Michigan president usually need time to wind down.

Not **Jennifer Grieco**.

The SBM president in 2018–2019 and recipient of the 2021 Michael Franck Award, Grieco took that momentum to start the Peak Law Movement, which invites lawyers to use their skills and expertise to make the world a better place. According to its website, Peak Law offers attorneys the opportunity to get involved and take leadership roles within the community.

“It is clear that Jennifer is committed to moving lawyers to ‘raise the bar on the bar,’” Jennifer Cupples wrote in her letter supporting Grieco’s nomination.

Already, Peak Law has worked with groups ranging from Lakeshore Legal Aid to the Joseph Project, which connects human trafficking survivors with pro bono legal services. Grieco also launched the Black Law Matters podcast, where she invites guests from the legal community to discuss social justice and other topics.

“Jennifer makes it a habit to contribute and positively impact the legal community,” Cupples wrote. “[She] is the epitome of a notable leader.”



### Delicia A. Coleman-Morson Unsung Hero Award

A vocal advocate for criminal justice reform and fairness, equality, and respect for all in courtrooms, **Delicia Coleman-Morson**’s peers have referred to her as a pit bull for justice.

Coleman-Morson, the 2021 Unsung Hero Award honoree, has held a variety of roles since graduating from University of Detroit Mercy Law School in 1994. One constant has been pro bono work, with a particular focus protecting civil rights and liberties. That includes supporting prisoners’ rights; decriminalizing homelessness; fighting for the LGBTQ community; and reforming the criminal justice system to eliminate practices that can discriminate against poor, minority, or disabled citizens.

“A fundamental lack of understanding that the people we represent are actual human individuals...is missing,” Coleman-Morson said.

As part of her pro bono efforts, she has represented those who can’t afford cash bail, fought for clients mistakenly sent to prison, and aggressively battled for the rights of defendants.

In a letter supporting her nomination, John F. Harris wrote, “Most people talk about problems that plague our communities. Coleman-Morson takes action and makes a difference.”

