

John F. Burns

What do the following persons have in common:

- minority victims of real estate blockbusting,
- Nigerian Catholic nuns,
- grandparents raising grandchildren,
- Michigan Native Americans,
- adults afflicted with autism, and
- women banned as members of organizations?

In two words, John Burns. Burns is an attorney who has always believed that it is important to speak out for those who cannot. His community activities run the gamut from helping women to representing minorities, pleading for the disabled to advising grandparents.

Along with the late Ted Rosenberg, Burns represented the plaintiffs in *Zuch v Hussey*¹ and obtained from Judge Damon Keith the first litigated order enjoining real estate blockbusting in the United States, guarding against racism and scare tactics in neighborhood real estate sales.

Burns has organized nonprofit corporations for Nigerian Catholic nuns working in Detroit and for other individuals and groups seeking vehicles for community service. The nuns came to the United States to establish a mission in America, which provides child-care and counseling, in addition to spreading their religious message. Other nonprofit corporations include two that provide services to persons suffering from autism, one that will provide college scholarships to Oakland County youth, a senior citizens housing group, and a support group for grandparents raising grandchildren.

In 2005, Burns helped organize Grandparents Raising Grandchildren. This organization does what its name implies. It provides counseling, transportation, bedding, and clothing to grandparents raising grandchildren.

Mediating a dispute between Michigan Native Americans and non-Michigan native



John Burns as he can often be found—on the telephone

groups has been one of the more interesting community services Burns has provided. The dispute concerned use of social facilities by two disparate groups of Native Americans. This assignment occurred early in his career and got Burns started on pro bono aid to nonprofit groups.

Have you read *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night* by Mark Haddon? If you have, you will have a newfound appreciation for the mind of a person afflicted with autism. Persons afflicted with autism can be helped, particularly if they have a supportive environment. Burns is one of the helpers—as a co-organizer, president, and attorney for Homes for Autism and Special Dreams Farm. Homes for Autism develops housing for adults afflicted with autism, and the Farm provides farm experiences for persons af-

fllicted with autism and other developmental disorders. Homes for Autism has four homes and hopes to purchase a fifth. Special Dreams is working with Michigan State University to establish a produce garden and hopes to acquire land of its own.

In the early 70s, Burns led the reorganization of the North Rosedale Park Civic Association, one of the oldest community organizations in Detroit, which owns the only private park and community house in Detroit. For over 50 years, the Civic Association was open only to male residents. Now women can become members. In addition to righting a serious wrong, this action helped revitalize the Civic Association.

Burns has practiced law in Detroit since 1964, building a successful and respected career in private practice. He is of counsel to

Plunkett & Cooney, P.C. in Detroit. He says one of the great advantages of working for a large law firm like Plunkett & Cooney is that its many lawyers have numerous business contacts and are actively involved in their communities.

Burns has practiced law primarily as a corporate and business lawyer representing for-profit corporations and nonprofit groups. He also has an extensive practice as an arbitrator in securities, commercial, and employment law matters. A majority of his practice has involved acquisitions, mergers, and related financing with clients engaged in manufacturing, healthcare, and other service-related businesses. Burns has assembled franchise systems and a number of health care ventures.

Burns views working as a corporate lawyer for nonprofit groups to be a “payback” for the fee-producing work he does for profit and nonprofit corporations. He says the great advantage to pro bono corporate and transactional work for nonprofit corporations is that his work benefits numerous people over a long period.

Burns has been involved with the Michigan attorney discipline system since 1979, first as a volunteer panel member and then as a hearing officer. He was appointed by the Michigan Supreme Court to the Attorney Discipline Board, where he served as chairman for two years. He also served as president of the Detroit Bar Association Foundation and led its fundraising drive, raising \$1 million for its Endowment Fund.

John Burns has dedicated his life to his family and the law, using both to further his values of hard work and public service. The oldest of three brothers, Burns was born and raised in Grand Rapids. He attended Aquinas College, where he met Beth Geller, his wife of 46 years. He was involved in numerous college activities, including chairing the annual Aquinas Gala Weekend and writing a bylined column for the school newspaper. He graduated with an undergraduate degree in biology. He went on to receive a master’s degree in biology and a law degree from the University of Detroit Mercy. He served as a teaching assistant while in graduate school. He was also a member and articles editor of the *University of Detroit Law Journal*.

The Burnses have five children (including two lawyers) and five grandchildren. They raised their family in Detroit, where John and Beth were active in numerous neighborhood and church organizations and civic groups. They were members of St. Scholastica parish and the North Rosedale Park Civic Association in Detroit for 33 years until moving to Northville in 2003.

Burns is a member of the Aquinas College Science Advisory Committee and Alumni Leadership Team for Southeast Michigan. He is a member of the Advisory Committee of PIME (Catholic missionary group) and has led fundraising events and interfaith activities on its behalf. He was the president of the Southeast Michigan Chapter and a national director of Association for Corporate Growth, an organization of executives and their outside consultants involved in mergers and acquisitions.

With busy practices and personal lives, attorneys may question how anyone expects

them to perform pro bono work or community service. Is there any doubt that John Burns is a shining example that there is always time for others? Former Michigan Supreme Court Justice Patricia Boyle certainly thinks so. She states, “John Burns’s dedication to public service, family, community, his clients, and the law exemplifies the highest tradition of the Citizen Lawyer. I am proud to have been his colleague and friend (and that of his wife and family) for 30 years.”◆

Francine Cullari practices real estate, estate planning, and business law in Grand Blanc. She is on the State Bar of Michigan Board of Commissioners and is vice chairperson of the Publications and Website Advisory Committee, where she is responsible for the Michigan Bar Journal. She is the editor of Bar Beat, a local magazine for the legal profession.

FOOTNOTE

1. 394 F Supp 1028 (1975) aff as modified.