

Citizen Lawyer: Michael Lavoie

By Hon. Fred M. Mester and Francine Cullari

Take a minute to dwell on four programs or systems or relationships—governmental, professional, community, personal—that you think cannot be improved. Difficult to think of any that you consider perfect? It is easy enough to find the flaws, but it takes a certain person with exceptional commitment and creativity to turn a good program into a great program. Such a person is Michael Lavoie, a senior partner in the Butzel Long law firm in Detroit.

The beneficiaries of his commitment and creativity are the children of Pontiac. Eight years ago, a group of professionals started the Pontiac Alumni Foundation (PAF) to address the endemic problems of Pontiac and, in turn, to give its youth a certainty of opportunity. Michael was one of the charter members, and now serves as secretary of PAF. Notwithstanding his valuable contributions in his capacity as an officer, he has, more importantly, been a role model and leader of the foundation's mentoring program.

The mentoring program was initiated four years ago by PAF. In addition to granting over 50 scholarships and 9 Teacher Incentive Awards over its short history, PAF realized that the only way it would make a real difference in the children's lives was through a hands-on approach by mentoring.

By way of generous support from Daimler-Chrysler Foundation and other partners, the mentoring program was started. Despite some success, the program simply was not engaged in the way PAF envisioned. Mike Lavoie was one of the initial volunteer mentors, and he started to pay particular attention to the program. One day, when the supervising mentor for the Lincoln Middle School where Michael was assigned had not addressed certain PAF commitments that had been made to the school's



Photo by John Meiu, Courtesy of Oakland County Legal News

The Pontiac Alumni Foundation (PAF) was one of the community partners that lent a helping hand to build a playground at Grace Gospel Fellowship in Pontiac, Michigan on September 29, 2007. Participants included (from left to right) Michelle Atwell, director of development at Grace Centers of Hope; Ayanna Hatchett of Hatchett, DeWalt & Hatchett, P.L.L.C. in Pontiac, PAF Gettysburg Group mentor; Miriah Evans, sophomore at Pontiac Northern High School; Michael J. Lavoie of Butzel Long in Detroit, PAF Gettysburg Group mentor; Pontiac Central High School sophomores Dwight Carpenter, Robert Harper, Miguel Rosario, and Bobby Walker; Oakland County Circuit Court Judge Fred M. Mester, PAF founder and president; and Shannon Grace Clark, director of communications for Grace Centers of Hope.

mentors and the program was about to fail, Mike took charge. He called the principal of Lincoln and asked for the 26 most at-risk students to meet him on a Wednesday morning. The principal and her staff provided Mike with the students—students who were failing, students who had trouble making any grade because their school attendance was nonexistent, and students who were constantly being suspended due to dysfunctional behavior. None of the students was expected to advance to the ninth grade.

Michael Lavoie became personally involved with the lives of each of the 26 students, and by getting them engaged in the world beyond their neighborhood, Mike

helped all 26 make it to high school! Several of them are now achieving well beyond academic expectations. To achieve such a daunting feat, Mike met with the students every Wednesday at 8 a.m., advising them that “we need” them more than they “need us.” He separated the 26 students into 6 groups and let them choose group names. He introduced them to the continent of Africa, with which he was reasonably familiar, and assigned each group to an African country on which they gave a weekly report. At the end of the year, among other achievements, the young eighth graders knew more about the African continent than most college students.

The 26 students, with Michael's encouragement, decided to call themselves the Gettysburg Group. The rationale the students gave for their choice was four-fold:

- (1) The school was named after Abraham Lincoln.
- (2) Gettysburg was a seminal moment, not only in Lincoln's life, but in that of our nation.
- (3) The Gettysburg Address—Michael helped the students apply the meaning of Lincoln's words to their own lives and to their country.
- (4) Gettysburg was a tipping point in the Civil War and this country's history, so the Gettysburg Group would be a tipping point in their lives.

The students had few influences that gave certainty to their lives; Michael gave certainty. Every Wednesday, religiously, they could count on Michael Lavoie to be with them. But he went beyond the one hour per week. He attended school functions. He contacted their parent(s) (usually there was only one parent). He encouraged his students in every way possible—taking them to Joe Dumars Pavilion for pick-up basketball games and to dinner at the local Coney Island—always letting each of his mentees know that he was there for them in the good times and when they were not so good. A couple of his mentees were suspended during this time; Mike was there to help them pick themselves up and learn from their experiences.

He coupled his mentoring with tutoring, community service (cleaning a local cemetery and park, helping churches with SOS programs to help the homeless, and packaging food boxes for the needy), and enrichment (taking a group of the students to the Henry Ford Museum, where they sat on the same bus as Rosa Parks, and to the Detroit Institute of Arts, having lunch on the Wayne State University campus).

Michael continued to engage them in discussion on how each one of them could make a better world. At the Joe Dumars Pavilion, one of Michael's mentees stopped playing to invite two young boys to join his game. Michael asked his student the next week what he did the prior week to make this a better world; the student mentioned

asking the two young boys to play, making their lives more eventful.

Many other anecdotes reveal how the lives of the students are better and, in turn, how the Pontiac community is better. Michael's Gettysburg mentoring program at Lincoln Middle School is now active at all of the Pontiac schools, with over 400 mentees and 85 mentors. All this is due to Mike's vision and commitment, and creative application of his vision. Michael Lavoie conducts the mentoring training despite his full schedule with the students and his work schedule at Butzel Long. He has conducted more than 7 mentor training programs with some 200 students in less than 15 months.

Twenty-six years ago, Michael Lavoie was with the Peace Corps, living in the Village of Namtenga, south of Tougouri. He met many people during his Peace Corps days who have remained his friends. He has maintained contact with the village, and through his vision and partnership with Cranbrook Kingswood, looms for making blankets and rugs were provided to Mike's adopted African village in the spring of 2007. Under his leadership, a playground for the children of Namtenga was also provided that spring. Michael also led a group from Cranbrook to meet with the people of Namtenga as well as the U.S. Ambassador to Burkina Faso. In each of Mike's endeavors, his wife, Carol, and two daughters, Katie Ann and Melissa Jane, give him support and offer their own contributions.

Michael Lavoie has not only significantly improved the PAF programs, but he has also distinguished himself as an exemplary law-

yer from his days as a federal prosecutor representing the United States through his present responsibilities with the Butzel firm, giving clients the highest professional representation. Throughout his entire adult life, he has given so much to his fellow human beings as well. Truly, Michael Lavoie exhibits the best of our profession and, more importantly, the best of our humanity. ■



Judge Mester has served on the circuit court since 1982. He is a graduate of Central Michigan University and Wayne State University School of Law, and was also a captain in the U.S. Army. Previously, Judge Mester was legal counsel for Chrysler Corporation, a federal prosecutor, and circuit court administrator. He has received numerous awards, including the Michigan Corrections Association Judicial Award for extraordinary contributions to enhancement of the judicial system.



Francine Cullari practices real estate, estate planning, and business law in Grand Blanc. She serves 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 teaches business law at the University of Michigan, Flint campus.