

Citizen Lawyer: Thomas C. Yeotis

By Francine Cullari

Take a walk down memory lane to learn how the son of the second Coney Island restaurant owner in Flint came to give back so much to the local community. Gust Yeotis emigrated from Greece to Traverse City, then to Cadillac, and on to Flint, opening shoeshine parlors along the way. He briefly returned to Greece to enter a partially arranged marriage to Georgia in 1929. When he returned, he opened the second Coney Island restaurant in Flint. If you are unfamiliar with Flint, Coney Island restaurants were as much a mainstay of the town as General Motors. In fact, Gust Yeotis opened his restaurant in 1936, the year of the sit-down strike at Chevrolet. He continued operating the restaurant until he retired.

Gust learned that hard, steady work and knowing and helping local residents can lead to success. His son, Tom, learned those skills as a child, and parlayed them into municipal, probate, and circuit court judgeships, engaging in a vast number of volunteer activities along the way. He learned much about life from his father and from his uncle, Harry Yeotis, who had no children but treated Tom as his own son. Harry told Tom, "I am not wearing this apron for myself; I am wearing it for you." Both his father and his uncle had a vision for Tom, and that vision did not place him behind the coney counter.

While Tom attended Flint schools, where he learned English and excelled at sports,

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Judge Yeotis enjoying a moment with Circuit Judge Duncan Beagle (Citizen Lawyer, February 2005).

his uncle was contributing to the Flint College and Cultural Center and funding a new school in his native Greek village of Skortsinou in the state of Arcadia. When the mountain village erected a statue in the village square in Harry's honor, the family could not be more proud—at least not until Tom graduated from Michigan State University with a degree in business administration and then received his law degree from Wayne State University.

Tom's uncle and father were founders of Flint's first Greek Orthodox Church, where his father served as treasurer for 20 years. Both men served in World War I in France, where Harry earned a Purple Heart. When he returned, Harry was very active in the American Legion and the Flint Chamber of Commerce. Tom's mother and aunt were also involved in the community as leaders of the Philoptochos Society, a Greek Ortho-

dox philanthropic organization. From his relatives, Tom learned the value, and perhaps the mandate, of contributing to the community. While Harry was showing Tom the importance of community service, Tom's father was showing him the value of an education by financing Tom's undergraduate and law degrees. When Tom was admitted to the State Bar in 1956, his father funded his first law office with \$2,000, at a time when a new car cost \$2,500.

A little more than a decade later, Tom was appointed to a municipal judgeship by the Flint City Council as a reward for his efforts as president of the Flint Housing Commission. The then Democratic city council approved the work of the commission, even though public housing was quite unpopular at the time; for many, it was the hated *quid* the federal government required from cities to receive the *quo* of urban renewal grants. The city clerk held an immediate swearing-in ceremony for fear that the council might rescind its vote; shortly after the vote, the council learned Tom was a Republican!

Tom's term as a municipal judge was short-lived, as he ascended to the probate court bench in 1968. Again, his tenure there was short; he moved on when a circuit court seat became available in 1971 and spent the next 27 years on the circuit bench. To this day, he still works as a visiting judge, arbitrator, and mediator.

Tom has been and continues to be involved with several community and professional organizations. Readers can appreciate the depth and breadth of Tom's

"The only people you should try to get even with are those who have helped you."

commitment by reviewing his lengthy list of volunteer services in the sidebar below. There is no doubt that he has fulfilled the fondest wishes of his parents and uncle. Now, he and his gracious spouse of 51 years, Magdalene (Meg), have passed the Yeotis values to their three children—Dean Yeotis, a local attorney, and Stephanie Kladis and

Georgeann Rivas, both of Chicago—and four grandchildren.

The Flint community has rewarded Tom time and again for his contributions with no fewer than 32 awards. When asked about his numerous activities consuming an untold number of hours, Tom humbly replies, “No one told me to give back. I just learned

by example that it was part of life. It was as natural and necessary as living itself for my family.”

Hon. Duncan Beagle of the Genesee County Circuit Court, a Citizen Lawyer featured in the *Michigan Bar Journal* in 2005, counts Tom Yeotis among the most influential persons in his life for more than 30 years.

Thomas C. Yeotis: A Lifetime of Influence and Accomplishment

Community Activities

50th CANUSA Games, Honorary Chair
 50th Flint Olympian Games, Honorary Chair
 AHEPA Athletic Hellenic Hall of Fame, Co-Chair
 Assumption Greek Orthodox Church, Board Member/Secretary/
 Youth Director/Athletic Director/Board of Governors
 Big Brothers Bowling Challenge, Campaign Chair
 Boysfarm, Director
 Bruin Club (Mott Community College Athletic Scholarship Fund),
 Director and President
 Catholic Social Services, Director
 Cystic Fibrosis Sports Challenge, Campaign Chair
 Flint Basketball Commission, President
 Flint Council on Alcoholism, Director
 Flint Housing Commission, President
 Flint Jaycees, Director
 Flint Men's Bowling Association, Director
 Flint Order of AHEPA (Greek-American Fraternal
 Organization), President
 Flint Y.M.C.A., Director
 Foundation for Mott Community College, Trustee and Chair
 Genesee County Development Conference,
 Director and President
 Genesee County Historical Society, Trustee
 Genesee County Legal Aid Society, Director and President
 Goodwill Industries, Trustee
 Greater Flint Area Sports Hall of Fame, Inc.,
 Director and President
 Hundred Club, Director
 Hurley Regional Medical Center Advisory Board, Trustee
 IMA Children's Recreation Fund, Director
 IMMA Greater Flint Area Baseball/Softball Commission, Director
 International Institute, Director and President
 Junior Achievement, Director
 March of Dimes National Foundation,
 Director and Campaign Chair
 MECCA Big Brothers and Big Sisters 3-on-3 Basketball
 Tournament, Executive Committee
 Michigan State Alumni Club—Genesee County,
 Director and President
 Mott Community College Alumni Association,
 Director and President
 New Paths Advisory Council, Chair
 New Paths, Inc. (Halfway House), Director
 Old Newsboys, Director
 Rubicon Odyssey House, Director
 Sports Foundation of Flint, Director
 Urban Coalition of Greater Flint, Director
 Urban League, Director
 Wayne State Fund, Director

Awards

American Inns of Court—Genesee County Bar Foundation
 and Centennial Chapter, Lifetime Achievement
 Bruin Club of Mott Community College, Alumni-Athlete
 of the Year
 Bruin Club of Mott Community College, William C. Blamer
 Distinguished Service
 Community School Directors of Flint Board of Education,
 Mott-Manley Distinguished Service
 Flint Area Chamber of Commerce, C. S. Mott Citizen of the Year
 Flint Board of Education, Distinguished Service
 Flint Central High School Alumni Association,
 Distinguished Alumnus/Hall of Fame Inductee
 Flint Chapter Order of AHEPA, Distinguished Leadership
 and Service
 Flint Jewish Federation, Donald Riegler
 Community Service Award
 Flint Mayor Woodrow Stanley, Mayor's Drum Major
 Flint Olympian and CANUSA Games Committee,
 Distinguished Service
 Genesee County Bar Association, Distinguished Service
 “Lawyer of the Year”
 Genesee County Bar Association, Liberty Bell Award
 Genesee County Bar Association—Young Lawyers Section,
 Justice Award/Attorney's Hall of Fame Inductee
 Genesee County Catholic Correctional Chaplain's Association,
 Michigan Amateur Softball Association Hall of Fame
 Inductee, St. Dismas
 Greater Flint Area Sports, Hall of Fame Inductee
 Greater Flint Olympian—CANUSA Association,
 Board of Directors Honorary Member
 Greek Orthodox Church of North and South America,
 Archdiocese Laity
 Hellenic-American Bar Association of Michigan,
 Distinguished Service
 March of Dimes National Foundation, Man of the Year
 Michigan Lawyers Weekly, “Top Ten” Most Respected
 Judges of Michigan
 Michigan State University Alumni Club of Genesee County,
 Distinguished Service
 Mott College Foundation, Distinguished Alumnus/
 Hall of Fame Inductee
 NHIBT Basketball Hall of Fame, Inductee
 Old Newsboys of Flint, Board of Directors Honorary Member
 Orthodox Youth Athletic Association of Michigan,
 Hall of Fame Inductee
 St. Nicholas Orthodox Church, Distinguished Service
 Supreme Lodge Order of AHEPA, Distinguished Service
 Wayne State Alumni Club of Greater Flint, Alumnus of the Year
 Wayne State University Law School, Distinguished Service



Judge Yeotis with his grandson, Nick Kladis.

Walter Griffin, recipient of the Michigan Excellence in Defense Award 2008 by the Michigan Defense Trial Council, reminisces, “As a young lawyer in the late 1970s, I observed that Judge Yeotis always treated lawyers and litigants alike with respect, even when it was abundantly clear the lawyer was over his head and dying at the podium. Tom was a mentor. His style was to let the lawyers work ‘between the sidelines’ and resolve the issues on their own. Many cases were amicably settled in that way.”

Tom’s son, Dean, shares two quotes he recalls from among his father’s advice. The first is: “The only people you should try to get even with are those who have helped you.” The second is an Indian prayer displayed prominently on his father’s office wall: “Great Spirit, grant that I may not criticize my neighbor until I have walked a mile in his moccasins.” Tom has lived these quotes through his never-ending contributions to his community. ■

Francine Cullari practices real estate, estate planning, and business law in Grand Blanc. She has served 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 and international business law at the University of Michigan–Flint.