



Opening Doors for the Indigent

Candace A. Crowley Recognized for Providing Access to Justice

Finding the courage to speak for the unpopular isn't easy. Having to sacrifice in order to do so makes it even harder.

But that's what makes Candace Crowley so special.

For 33 years, Crowley has completely immersed herself in the fight for access to justice for the poor and disadvantaged, and she has never backed down.

From a young age, Crowley felt not just a desire, but an obligation, to stand up for the weakest among us. She went to law school knowing exactly what she wanted to do with her degree. She landed a clerk position in legal aid while still in school and a legal aid contract position upon graduating.

Crowley says these experiences cemented her desire to dedicate her career to helping those in need.

"I saw the tremendous unmet legal needs of the poor up close, and I had talented lawyers teaching me how to be an advocate so that I could actually make a difference for them," she said. "That let me see the value of the work, and so I grew devoted to it and saw the reward much more than I craved material things that bigger money in a different work environment could provide."

Crowley went on to lead countless endeavors aimed at access to justice for the poor, including a position as executive director of Lakeshore Legal Aid, where she pioneered telephone hotline services—a model used throughout the state.

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Crowley said her time in legal aid provided extraordinary highs and lows.

"The most rewarding time was when the poor got justice without regard for their economic status," she said. "Preventing the eviction of a family, restoring utility service, and obtaining health insurance coverage are rewarding things that advocates can accomplish for clients when the justice system works."

On the flip side, Crowley said it's a tough pill to swallow when it goes the other way, i.e., when the poor don't get justice because of their status.

"I recall a case where a judge refused to order a water department to restore water to a house for a pregnant mother of three children during an exceptionally hot summer," she said. "The merits were on her side. But she died in childbirth, and I am certain that the stress of living without water and trying to use the justice system under duress—riding the bus to the legal aid office and to court many times in the sweltering heat with young children in tow—contributed to her death."

But moments like this only strengthened Crowley's resolve and solidified her desire to be heard on behalf of the poor.

She ultimately found an even larger platform with the State Bar of Michigan, where she is currently the Bar's director of external development. In that role, she provides leadership and support for the Committee on Justice Initiatives, the annual statewide Justice Initiatives Summit, and the yearly Bar Leadership Forum, among other things.

Crowley is using her position with the State Bar to find and work with allies in the constant fight to make things better for indigent clients. Her work has benefitted thousands, and her voice is loud and clear.

She says the most rewarding part of working with the State Bar is "finding and working with so many people who want the justice system to be the best it can be, helping the conversations about

Lawyers make a difference for people and society. They solve problems, provide free legal help to the poor, and give time to many other community efforts.



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that, and finding resources to make improvements in the administration of justice."

Crowley has accomplished much, but her work is far from over. She said that if she could change anything about the legal aid world, it would be the lack of resources.

"The number of jobs in the legal profession that are devoted to making the world a better place, having a fair justice system, and doing the right thing are quite few," she said, adding that pay is generally pretty low and funding for those jobs is under constant attack.

Of course, legal aid advocates can rest assured that these issues will not be swept under the rug on Crowley's watch.

Meanwhile, Crowley's dedication was recognized by the Michigan State Bar Foundation at the State Bar Annual Meeting on September 19 in Grand Rapids.

The Foundation presented Crowley with its Access to Justice Award, which honors individuals who have significantly advanced access to justice for the poor in Michigan.

In honoring Crowley, Michigan State Bar Foundation Executive Director Linda Rexer said it's what she does outside the limelight that really sets her apart.

"In addition to Candace's visible leadership roles, she is also a force of nature behind the scenes supporting and guiding many others who are working to assure legal help for those in need," Rexer said. "Her career and volunteer efforts have significantly advanced access to justice in Michigan, which the Foundation is very pleased to recognize with this award."

Photo by Tammy Allen for the State Bar of Michigan



From left to right: SBM Past President Julie I. Fershtman, Michigan State Bar Foundation President Margaret J. Nichols, SBM Director of External Development Candace A. Crowley, and SBM President Bruce A. Courtade.

State Bar Executive Director Janet Welch made similar observations.

"Candace is an individual of diverse and surprising talents, but her passion for justice and love of the legal profession are so much a part of her identity that it is impossible to imagine her using her considerable gifts in any other way," she said. "She enriches those of us who have the pleasure of working with her, and reminds us every day of the joy of making a difference." ■