

A Time to Celebrate Our Best

State Bar of Michigan 2018 Award Winners

By Mike Eidelbes, Lynn Patrick Ingram, and Samantha Meinke

The State Bar of Michigan honored exemplary representatives of the legal profession during the 2018 Awards Banquet, held on September 26 at DeVos Place in Grand Rapids in conjunction with the SBM NEXT Conference. Outgoing SBM President Donald G. Rockwell and incoming President Jennifer M. Grieco presented the following awards during the banquet.

Roberts P. Hudson Award

In 2014, State Bar of Michigan leaders realized challenges confronting the legal profession had changed dramatically but the profession itself had not changed to meet them. They established the 21st Century Practice Task Force and charged it with identifying the challenges of the legal profession and recommending solutions. When they needed someone to lead the profession into the future, State Bar leaders reached out to Bruce A. Courtade and Julie I. Fershtman.

“The prospect of successfully completing that work within a one-year timeline was daunting,” former SBM presidents Hon. Alfred Butzbaugh and Edward Pappas wrote in a nomination letter. “Ms. Fershtman and Mr. Courtade persisted, and they successfully satisfied those challenges. And they did so within the established timeline.”

Courtade and Fershtman are co-recipients of this year’s Roberts P. Hudson Award.

Some people are born to serve. Others are born to lead. **Bruce A. Courtade** is one of those rare people who are both.

“He is untiring in his performance, unwavering in his commitment to an organization that he loves, and unstoppable when he puts his mind and energy behind something,” said Steve Grafton, president and CEO of the Alumni Association of the University of Michigan, in a 2012 *Michigan Bar Journal* article when Courtade became State Bar president. “Bruce is one of the most honorable men I know. He fights hard, but he fights fair, and his fight is always for something worthwhile.”

“Bruce has a unique ability to make every person he comes in contact with fall in love with a cause or organization he is passionate about. He even got me to fall in love with the University of Michigan and I’m a Michigan State University alum!” said Luisa



Schumacher, former executive director of West Michigan Center for Arts and Technology, in the same *Bar Journal* article. “Bruce moves people to act. His ability to transfer passion into action is what makes him remarkable.”

The State Bar has been fortunate to count Courtade as a passionate advocate and leader for decades. He served as State Bar president from 2012 to 2013, was on the Board of Commissioners from 2004 to 2013, chaired the State Bar Representative Assembly from 2000 to 2001, and was a member of the Assembly from 1995 to 2001. He has also devoted countless hours serving on SBM committees and as a member of the Litigation and Negligence Law sections.

Courtade is a shareholder and vice president at Rhoades McKee in Grand Rapids, practicing commercial litigation and mediation and construction law. In addition to his volunteer work with the State Bar, he has offered his time and energy to many other organizations that strive to improve the legal profession. He was a member of the American Bar Association House of Delegates and numerous ABA sections; a trustee of the Michigan State Bar Foundation; a member of the Michigan Supreme Court Historical Society Board of Directors and Litigation Counsel of America; and a panelist for the Michigan Attorney Discipline Board.

He has also worked to improve educational institutions and his local community. He was a board member and officer of the Alumni Association of the University of Michigan and a member of the university’s Advisory Board of Intercollegiate Athletics. He has served on the Court Liaison and Judicial Review committees of the Grand Rapids Bar Association; as a member of the Federal Bar Association of the Western District of Michigan; on the Legislative, Public Policy and Tax & Regulatory Affairs Committee of the Grand Rapids Area Chamber of Commerce; as a life member of the Justice Foundation of West Michigan; as a member of the Board of Directors of Metro Health; and as a board member of West Michigan Center for Arts and Technology. He is a member of Builders Exchange of Michigan and the Economic Club of Grand Rapids.

Courtade's volunteer work has earned him many accolades. He received the State Bar's John W. Cummiskey Pro Bono Award in 1991 for providing outstanding pro bono service to a Grand Rapids-area National Guard recruiting office, coordinating 350 local attorneys who helped families with wills, powers of attorney, and housing and credit issues. He also received the Grand Rapids Bar Association President's Award in 2007 and the Alumni Association of the University of Michigan Distinguished Service Award.

"Bruce definitely believes in the power of one—the ability of each of us to make a difference," his wife, Jenny DeLessio, remarked when he became Representative Assembly Chair. "Bruce remains as committed as ever to enhancing the lawyer's role in society. He truly wants the legal system to support those it intends to serve. So he builds—idea after idea, project after project, Bar committee after Bar committee—from a seemingly never-ending wellspring of insights into what the important issues are and how to take the crucial first step toward solutions."

Julie I. Fershtman has faced her share of adversity.

During her first year of law school, her father—her inspiration for becoming a lawyer—died. When she set out to practice law, she knew she wanted to establish a niche practice focused on equine law. At the 1993 American Bar Association Convention, legal marketing guru Jay Foonberg warned her she would starve if she did. Two months after being sworn in as president of the State Bar of Michigan, she was diagnosed with breast cancer.

But Fershtman doesn't crumble under the pressure of impediments. She persists.

She accomplished everything she set out to achieve as State Bar president. And to find out how successful her equine practice has become, pick up the ABA book *Marketing Success Stories* or Google "equine lawyer" and prepare to be awestruck.

"She is a great role model for hard work, endurance, and creative success," wrote Elizabeth Jamieson in a 2011 *Michigan Bar Journal* article about Fershtman when she became State Bar president. "Most people go to work to earn a living. Some people work to make a difference—in our communities, within a profession, or, more simply, for the benefit of others. This is Julie."

Fershtman got involved with bar associations and other legal entities to build a professional network and quickly rose through the leadership ranks.

She served as State Bar president from 2011 to 2012, was a member of the Board of Commissioners from 1994 to 2012, chaired the State Bar Representative Assembly from 2001 to 2002, chaired the State Bar Young Lawyers Section from 1995 to 1996, was a Michigan delegate to the ABA House of Delegates from 2010 to 2012, and was vice chair of the ABA-TIPS Animal Law Committee from 2005 to 2014. She has served on the Board of Trustees of the Michigan State Bar Foundation and on the Michigan Supreme Court Historical Society Board of Directors. She is a Fellow of the American College of Equine Attorneys, Oakland County Bar Foundation, and Michigan State Bar Foundation and a Life Fellow of the American Bar Foundation. She also served on the Oakland County Bar Association Board.



"She approaches everything she does with a contagious enthusiasm, which instills a positive attitude in those around her," April Neihsl wrote. "She is diplomatic and open-minded, which puts everyone at ease to contribute in whatever way they can. Above all, Julie leads by example. This inspires everyone to work as tirelessly as she does to achieve results."

Fershtman is an equity shareholder at Foster Swift Collins & Smith in Southfield, representing clients in a broad range of business, personal injury, contract, and insurance coverage litigation pertaining to several industries, including major insurance companies. She is widely considered one of the nation's leading practitioners in equine law. Her peers selected her as one of approximately 20 lawyers in the country to serve as a Fellow of the American College of Equine Attorneys.

She has also been an active volunteer within her local community and with national associations. She has served on the Advisory Board and been a director for the Equine Land Conservation Resource, was a director of the American Youth Horse Council, was a commissioner on the Franklin Village Planning Commission, and was appointed to the Franklin Village Charter Committee. A frequent author on legal issues, she has written more than 400 published articles, three books, and two blogs and is a highly sought-after national speaker.

Fershtman's outstanding volunteer work has earned her numerous honors over the years. She was named Woman of the Year by *Michigan Lawyers Weekly* and has received the State Bar Representative Assembly Michael Franck Award, the Oakland County Bar Association Professionalism Award, and the Women Lawyers Association of Michigan Jean King Leadership Award, given each year to commend a lawyer or judge for outstanding leadership in the advancement of women.

"I believe that a true professional inspires others, strives for excellence in everything he or she does, and makes his or her mark on the profession and the public in a positive way," Robert S. Bick, Fershtman's husband, wrote in the *Michigan Bar Journal* right before she became chair of the Representative Assembly. "Julie is all of these things."

Frank J. Kelley Distinguished Public Service Award

What hasn't former Michigan Supreme Court Chief Justice **Marilyn J. Kelly** done? This might be the most appropriate question when looking back on her illustrious career as a public servant.

Michigan voters elected Kelly to office six times. She has served as State Board of Education president, Michigan Court of Appeals judge, and Michigan Supreme Court justice and chief justice.

During her tenure on the high court, her passion about access to justice was evident.

In addition to taking the court to venues outside of Lansing for oral arguments, she was the driving force behind Michigan Legal Help, the end result of her Solutions on Self-Help Task Force, which changed the game for self-represented litigants in the state.



Between the launch of Michigan Legal Help in late 2012 to its most recent public report in early 2017, the site received just under 10 million page views and 11 self-help centers were launched throughout the state.

Her accomplishments don't stop there.

"[Kelly is responsible for] distributing the first judicial pro bono tool kit to Michigan's 600+ judges, creating the position in her office of director of access and fairness, promoting assistance to help those with language or cultural barriers, and devoting much of her 2010 State of the Judiciary address before the legislature to enhance access to justice," Hon. Alfred M. Butzbaugh and former Michigan State Bar Foundation Executive Director Linda Rexer wrote.

Kelly has an equally impressive record of professional and community service for a variety of groups, including the Michigan Leader Dogs for the Blind, Birmingham Unitarian Church, Channel 56 Public Television, the National Consortium for Racial and Ethnic Fairness in the Courts, the Michigan State Bar Foundation, and the Executive Committee of the Wayne Law School Board of Visitors. She has also served as president of the Women Lawyers Association of Michigan (WLAM) and the Women's Bar Association.

Kelly is currently distinguished jurist in residence at Wayne State University Law School, where she teaches and has endowed a scholarship for law students dedicated to a career in public service and access to justice. She is also a member of the Wayne State University Board of Governors.

Dawn Van Hoek, director of the State Appellate Defender's Office, served with Kelly at WLAM—they were successive presidents of the organization. She said Kelly's vision and commitment to equal justice for women and everyone in society continued after she was elected to the Supreme Court.

"Throughout it all, Justice Kelly has envisioned a system guaranteeing equal access to justice for all, the epitome of a lawyer's public service."

Attorney Melissa Atherton, who nominated Kelly, said her "dedication and accomplishments are truly inspiring, making her an excellent candidate for this award."

Van Hoek agreed.

"To say that Justice Kelly is deserving of the award is an understatement: she defines public service in ways that inspire us all."

Former Michigan Supreme Court Chief Justice **Robert P. Young Jr.**'s tenure in public service can best be described as transformative.

During his unprecedented six-year run as chief justice, there were no sacred cows. Young tackled everything from "rightsizing" the judiciary to improving service to embracing a tone of collegiality and civility at the top court that trickled down into the entire system.

"Bob's commitment to achieving measurable results in each of these areas required not only his administrative leadership, but his effective promotion of the ideas to the judges and their staff throughout the state," said Justice Bridget McCormack in her letter of nomination. "It worked."



McCormack said Young's commitment to rightsizing the judiciary, which resulted in the reduction of more than 40 judgeships around the state and millions of dollars in savings, was not complicated but long overdue.

His approach "deeply reflected [his] commitment to making sure that our courts (and the supporting taxpayer resources) were serving the citizens," she said.

Young championed the use of technology in Michigan courtrooms by providing the hardware and encouraging the innovative use of software. Video conferencing, electronic filing, and online programming were among the many improvements he focused on.

He also "championed and supported the michiganlegalhelp.org website and courthouse support system to serve the many unrepresented litigants in our courts, making it among the nation's best resources for pro se litigants," McCormack said. "Bob saw what technology could do for the courts' service mission and supported every idea for using it to increase access and efficiency."

In addition, Young encouraged and supported the development and innovation of problem-solving courts throughout the state, providing training and resources to trial courts and partnering with the other branches of government for funding. As a result, Michigan leads the nation in veteran treatment courts.

Finally, McCormack pointed out what might be Young's biggest accomplishment.

"As the chief justice, Bob set a tone at the top of collegiality and civility that was strongly welcomed by the bench and bar throughout the state," she said. "It was long overdue, to be sure, but with his leadership at the top he should get credit for resetting the tone for the entire branch of government as one of collaboration and joint mission."

"The benefits to the public when the courts are viewed as truly nonpartisan cannot be overstated, in my view; all of the courts' work and outcomes are enhanced as a result."

She concluded by noting that, like any truly distinguished public servant, "Bob started with himself" by approaching "every conversation with an open mind and a willingness to change his view."

A simple, but transformative approach to public service.

Champion of Justice Award

Being a champion is easy when you hold all the advantages. It's not quite as simple when the odds aren't in your favor.

In her past position with Legal Aid of Western Michigan and her current role with the American Civil Liberties Union's Grand Rapids office, **Miriam J. Aukerman** has forged a reputation as a defender of the rights of those who nearly always lack an advocate. Ultimately, her willingness to become a voice for the least powerful people in society has led to legal precedents protecting them.

Three federal court cases highlight the magnitude of Aukerman's work. In 2013, the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Sixth Circuit upheld her challenge of Michigan's anti-begging law on First Amendment grounds, which the City of Grand Rapids had used to arrest



nearly 400 people in 2008–2011, saying it infringed on a substantial amount of protected solicitation.

Three years later in 2016, Aukerman and her team claimed the state's sex-offender registry law was unconstitutional because it punished registrants without delivering a corresponding public safety benefit. The Sixth Circuit agreed, unanimously ruling that the law was unconstitutional and offered "scant evidence that such restrictions serve the professed purpose of keeping Michigan communities safe."

Also in 2016, Aukerman successfully challenged the Michigan Department of Health and Human Services' policy of automatically denying food assistance to qualified citizens based on a match with a computerized list of outstanding felony warrants; federal law requires individual circumstances be considered on a case-by-case basis. Again, the Sixth Circuit sided with Aukerman, reinstating assistance to approximately 20,000 Michigan residents.

Aukerman is also fighting the Grand Rapids Police Department's longstanding practice of arresting innocent people for criminal trespass on commercial property without warning and without the business owner's knowledge. That case is pending in federal district court.

Before her work with the ACLU, Aukerman developed and oversaw the Legal Aid of Western Michigan Reentry Law Project. The program helps people with criminal records fight legal barriers preventing them from being productive citizens, employees, and family members, and trains lawyers and others on reentry law issues.

One of Aukerman's nominators paraphrased the words of United States Supreme Court Justice Thurgood Marshall in supporting her for the Champion of Justice Award: "Miriam Aukerman's work is the highest tribute to the law, as it fundamentally recognizes the humanity of our fellow beings."

Robert J. Heimbuch believes in second chances. In fact, he feels so strongly about them that he has dedicated his entire career to helping Wayne County's troubled youth get on—and stay on—the right path.

Since being named deputy chief of the Juvenile Division of the Wayne County Prosecutor's Office in 2001 and chief in 2004, Heimbuch has developed and operated several highly successful diversion programs such as Right TRAC, Correct Course, and Erase Truancy, giving deserving youthful offenders a chance to bypass the formal court system and avoid delinquency adjudication.

Over the years, he has done a lot of heavy lifting but, wow, has it paid off.

And the youth are not the only beneficiaries. His diversion programs have had a positive trickle-down effect on the community.

In her letter of nomination, Wayne County Prosecutor Kym Worthy wrote, "Not only have these programs collectively touched thousands of Wayne County youth for more than a decade, but they have also achieved most impressive outcomes by way of recidivism rates under 10 percent annually for those juveniles who successfully graduated."



This, she noted, ultimately translates into safer communities, which has been reflected in yearly declines in new delinquency complaints filed by the county's police departments.

But that's not all.

"The efficiencies created by Bob's diversion programs, both in terms of cost savings and time, have also been significant and lasting in their impact to Wayne County," Worthy wrote. "Besides the front-end time and costs efficiencies achieved by eliminating many formal court hearings, there is a back-end, post-dispositional savings that cannot be understated. The savings created by Bob's diversion programs can then be allocated to other areas of need within Wayne County."

The result, according to Worthy, is "millions of dollars in annual savings each year."

Those who know and have worked with Heimbuch say that his efforts run deep.

Third Judicial Circuit Court Judge Virgil Smith said Heimbuch is always looking for new and better ways to do things, noting a recent collaboration to create a juvenile mental health court that "provides a more focused and therapeutic setting to address the special rehabilitative needs of delinquents with significant mental health issues."

Demetria Brue, 36th District Court judge, said Heimbuch's "style as a supervisor and unrelenting determination to administer justice" have influenced the way she runs her courtroom.

Cynthia Smith, CEO of Assured Family Services/Juvenile Assessment Division, said Heimbuch's approach and programs have "influenced so many families and children to not become a 'statistic' but rather to be better able to identify their own needs [and] access locally accessible services, and to be accountable for participation and change."

Detroit Bar Association President Donn Fresard perhaps summed it up best.

"Bob's integrity, dedication, and fairness truly exemplify the heart of a true 'Champion of Justice.'"

Kimberly M. Cahill Bar Leadership Award

When the **Women Lawyers Association of Michigan** was founded by five self-described "ardent portias" on March 24, 1919, women didn't have the right to vote, equal access to job listings, or wage parity with men.

The first WLAM members worked to change that by promoting women as leaders of the legal profession to bring social justice to society. It played an instrumental role in the election of Hon. Lila Neuenfeldt as the first woman on the Michigan circuit bench and the election of Hon. Cornelia Kennedy to the Wayne County Circuit Court before she rose to become the first woman to serve as chief judge for a federal district court.



Donna M. MacKenzie
WLAM



Kristen Pursley
WLAM

Today, WLAM works to advance the interests of women in the legal profession, promote improvements in the administration of justice, and promote equality and social justice for all people. It has grown into a statewide organization of nearly 600 members and seven regional chapters within which more than 350 women have taken on the leadership role of president, including Kimberly M. Cahill.

WLAM and its regional chapters host more than 50 events each year to improve communities across the state, reading to children, collecting donations for soup kitchens, and participating in charity fundraisers. The organization currently works to advance gender pay equity and end family responsibilities discrimination. It also encourages the professional improvement of its members through business development seminars, pro bono service, legal education, leadership training, and networking events.

WLAM formed a charitable arm, the Women Lawyers Association Foundation, in 1983, awarding five \$500 scholarships to women law students. In the ensuing 35 years, the foundation has awarded more than \$500,000 to nearly 250 women law students. In 2006, WLAM's state board established the Jean King Leadership Award in honor of social justice activist and attorney Jean Ledwith King, given each year to a lawyer or judge in recognition of outstanding leadership in the advancement of women.

"Each woman I have met within this organization has been a leader in her own right and never once has failed to step forward to assist other members," wrote Tanya Grillo in a letter supporting the nomination. "Together we are judges, lawyers, community activists, and creative thinkers. Being part of this organization has provided countless opportunities for me to assist my community and fellow female attorneys."

John W. Reed Michigan Lawyer Legacy Award

Houston Texans great J. J. Watt recently said, "If you want to be remembered as great, if you want to be a legend, you have to go out there every single day and do stuff."

Based on that definition, University of Detroit Mercy School of Law Professor **Lawrence Dubin** is a true legend.

He's done stuff. Lots of stuff. And he's done it every day for more than 40 years.

Since 1975, Dubin has taught Professional Responsibility, Civil Procedure, Evidence, Trial Practice, Seminars in Selected Problems in Legal Ethics, and Law and Psychiatry. He is widely considered one of the best law professors in Michigan.

But according to those who know him best, it's the way he connects the subjects to real life that makes him special.

"Professor Dubin has not just taught generations of law students about multiple subjects, he has done so in ways that effectively relate the subject matter at hand to the larger connections between the law and society," wrote attorney Kenneth Mogill, who teaches as an adjunct at U of D.



Mogill said Dubin has "creatively humanized and personalized these lessons, especially lessons in legal ethics, through the production of documentaries about notable legal figures, their careers, and the struggles they faced."

Dubin was an innovator in applying storytelling to legal education, and his documentaries have been used in law schools nationwide.

He has authored or coauthored books on the attorney discipline system, trial practice, evidence, and the particular legal problems of individuals on the autism spectrum. He has also worked to promote diversity in legal education through a series of videos produced in collaboration with former ABA president and Detroit mayor Dennis Archer for minority law students on the challenges and benefits of law school.

This unwavering dedication to elevating the quality of legal practice in Michigan makes him a worthy recipient of the John W. Reed Michigan Lawyer Legacy Award.

"Professor Dubin's contributions to our law school and to the legal profession are countless," said Dean Phyllis Crocker. "His tremendous influence is evident in the achievements of his students, the respect of his colleagues, and the attention given to his writing and public advocacy. He has spent his career working to make law students, lawyers, and the public better informed about the duties and values of lawyers in a just society."

Tish Vincent, Lawyers and Judges Assistance Program administrator for the State Bar of Michigan, agreed.

"Professor Dubin is a decent, caring man and the consummate legal professional and legal educator," she said. "He brings his personal integrity and his love of the law and of education to everything he does."

John W. Cummiskey Pro Bono Award

The numbers are staggering. Since first volunteering with Elder Law of Michigan in 2013, **Charles "David" Jones** has helped approximately 900 seniors with their legal issues and donated nearly 2,000 hours of his time to the effort. It's pretty remarkable stuff for a guy who helps out a couple of days a week.



Jones isn't just an asset to the clinic's clients, who often can't afford legal services and need help with creditors, Medicaid and Medicare issues, and landlord-tenant disputes. He's also a terrific resource for Elder Law of Michigan, sharing his knowledge and expertise with staff members and volunteers.

Jones's diligence and the sheer number of cases he's handled have been a boon to Elder Law of Michigan. As a private nonprofit organization with a limited budget, his efforts free up other volunteers to take on cases that may otherwise fall by the wayside. In 2017, Elder Law of Michigan assisted more than 4,700 clients.

"Without David, these seniors may not have had access to any legal service," wrote Jadranko Tomic Bobas, Elder Law of Michigan managing attorney, in his letter supporting Jones's nomination. "Getting legal advice from experienced attorneys...empowers

and improves seniors' economic security and provides them with much-needed peace of mind."

Jones was an administrative law judge for the Michigan Administrative Hearing System from 1996 until his retirement in 2013. Before that, he was an administrative law judge for the Department of Health and Human Services for nearly 20 years and spent just under two years as a staff attorney for Legal Aid of Western Michigan.

Liberty Bell Award

"The greatness of a community is most accurately measured by the compassionate actions of its members," Coretta Scott King once said.

The **Urban League of West Michigan** (ULWM) works to create the greatest of communities. Founded in 1943, it strives to be the preeminent agency in West Michigan to build alliances and create opportunities to foster economic empowerment, advancement, and achievement for African Americans, other minorities, and impoverished people in employment, housing, education, and health.

The Grand Rapids Bar Association nominated ULWM for the Liberty Bell Award for many reasons, but particularly for two programs that contribute to the effective functioning of institutions of government and foster a better understanding and appreciation of the rule of law.

The first of these programs, the Center for Housing and Community Development, works with tenants and landlords to educate



Joseph D. Jones
ULWM

both groups on rights and responsibilities and advocate for homelessness prevention. ULWM provides four monthly opportunities for renters to get answers to questions, learn about legal options, and understand possible outcomes through the Tenant Law Project, a collaboration of ULWM and other community and legal organizations. As of August 1 of this year, the program has served more than 2,300 client-guests with housing issues, conducted nearly 1,300 one-on-one counseling sessions, and helped 453 households avoid eviction or foreclosure.

"ULWM staff is a lifeline for vulnerable individuals and families facing eviction and homelessness," wrote Dale Ann Iverson and Kimberly Coleman in the nomination.

The second program, the Parent Empowerment Network, supports parents seeking educational success for their children in a complicated system of discipline and special education services. It offers an "opportunity line" parents can call for assistance, organizes and conducts parent advocacy courses, facilitates the organization of the Parent Leadership Network to improve accountability of schools, and partners with other local, state, and national educational associations.

"Research has demonstrated that brown and black children are more likely to receive the most severe discipline, and that black and brown children are less likely to receive special education services," wrote Iverson and Coleman. "The PEN works to help parents navigate the educational system to ensure the highest academic success for their children and to understand their rights guaranteed by the state. These are the 'up-stream' services that hold out hope of cutting off the school-to-prison pipeline."

Representative Assembly Awards

The State Bar of Michigan Representative Assembly presented awards to two individuals during its business meeting on September 27.

Michael Franck Award

Hon. Victoria A. Roberts has spent her entire professional life in Michigan, but she has made an impact on the global legal community.

The Detroit native is probably best known as a longtime judge in the U.S. District Court for the Eastern District of Michigan and the only black female to serve as president of the State Bar of Michigan. But Roberts has also helped train lawyers and judges in Kenya and Malaysia, lectured on collaborating and cooperating witnesses in Serbia, given presentations on intellectual property issues to legal professionals in Peru and Thailand, and participated in U.S. government-sponsored programs in Botswana, Namibia, and Nepal.

That's not to say she's turned her back on her hometown. A previous winner of the State Bar's Roberts P. Hudson and Champion



of Justice awards, Roberts played a significant role in negotiating collective bargaining agreements between the City of Detroit and its public employees union, a major step forward in the city's successful emergence from the largest municipal bankruptcy in U.S. history.

Recently, Roberts has launched herself headlong into efforts to help people who can't afford legal assistance. She's a driving force behind this year's opening of the Detroit federal district court Pro Se Legal Assistance Clinic, where students from the University of Detroit Mercy School of Law (Roberts is a member of its advisory board) provide legal advice to low-income citizens seeking to represent themselves in federal civil suits. During the 2016 fiscal year, non-prisoner litigants without legal representation filed 10 percent of all new civil cases in the Eastern District of Michigan—most of them civil rights disputes, employment discrimination cases, Social Security appeals, and contract issues.

(Continued on the following page)

Representative Assembly Awards (continued)

“The amount of money someone has should not dictate whether they have access to the court system,” Roberts told the *Detroit Legal News* in January. “Providing legal services to the poor gives them a passport to the justice system.”

She’s also had a hand in the court’s Early Mediation Program for Pro Se Prisoner Rights Cases, which debuted in June. The two-year pilot project gives Michigan prisoners who’ve filed federal civil rights lawsuits an opportunity to meet with state corrections officials and attorneys in front of a trained mediator in an effort to avoid litigation.

Roberts has also been instrumental in the Eastern District of Michigan Judicial Externship Program. Now in its 17th year, the program pairs minority law students with federal district judges in Detroit, Ann Arbor, Bay City, Flint, and Port Huron.

Unsung Hero Award

Michele P. Fuller lives at the intersection of her career and her family, which offers an explanation regarding her passion for her clients.

The founder of the Macomb-based Michigan Law Center, Fuller’s focus during her 20-plus years as a practicing attorney has been on elder law issues, settlement plan-



ning, veterans affairs planning, and special-needs planning. She has intimate knowledge in that last area—Fuller is a mother of four, two of whom are special needs.

She has become a nationally recognized expert on special-needs planning. An author or coauthor of four books relating to special-needs and elder law planning, Fuller is currently working on a fifth book pertaining to Michigan special-needs trust law. She has coauthored several published articles on the subject and made upwards of 50 speaking appearances across the country during the last five years.

During her career, Fuller has received numerous honors and awards. She was chosen as top special-needs advocate by *Parenting* in 2013; named as one of the 10 best elder law attorneys in the United States by the American Institute of Legal Counsel in 2016, 2017, and 2018; and honored in *Lawyer Monthly’s* annual women in the law issue in 2016.

Fuller is a longtime member of the State Bar of Michigan Elder Law and Disability Rights Section, including a stint as chair in 2017. She has been part of the Academy of Special Needs Planners advisory board since 2012 and sits on the board of the Michigan chapter of the National Academy of Elder Law Attorneys, a post she’s held since 2013.

Awards from Other Organizations

Michigan State Bar Foundation Founders Award

The Founders Award was presented to **Thomas W. Linn** at the Awards Banquet on September 26. The award recognizes lawyers who exemplify professional excellence and outstanding community contributions.

Linn has provided significant leadership to ensure that everyone, regardless of income, receives access to justice. As chair emeritus of Miller Canfield, he has instilled a culture of pro bono throughout the firm. He has frequently volunteered at various clinics sponsored by Lakeshore Legal Aid, the Capuchins, and others,



and for many years has provided more than 200 hours of annual pro bono service. He has also assisted organizations and agencies that facilitate pro bono services to low-income and underserved communities. Linn regularly participates in the State Bar’s American Bar Association Day trip to Washington, D.C., to advocate for increased federal funding for civil legal aid. He has also provided tremendous leadership and assistance to the Michigan State Bar Foundation to increase financial resources from the legal community through the Access to Justice Campaign.

Linn currently serves on the Michigan Community Resources Board and chairs the Lakeshore Legal Aid Board. He has been involved in transition periods with both organizations, providing tremendous wisdom and support. Linn chaired the Miller Canfield Pro Bono Committee from 2010 to 2016.

Michigan State Bar Foundation Access to Justice Award

The Access to Justice Award was presented to **Lorray S. C. Brown** on September 26 at the Michigan State Bar Foundation Fellows Reception. The award honors persons who have significantly advanced access to justice for the poor in Michigan.



An extremely passionate and knowledgeable consumer advocate, Brown has devoted her career to helping vulnerable consumers and homeowners. She has been the consumer law specialist at the Michigan Poverty Law Program since 2001, serves as co-director of Michigan State-wide Advocacy Services, and has been director of the Michigan Foreclosure Prevention Program (MFPP) since its inception in 2009.

MFPP partners with legal aid offices and housing counselors throughout Michigan to provide legal representation to homeowners facing foreclosure, collaborate with housing counselors to avoid foreclosure early in the process, and coordinate state-wide policy advocacy. In the nine years since its launch, MFPP attorneys have served approximately 41,000 households and saved more than 16,000 homes. Brown regularly trains legal aid attorneys and pro bono attorneys on consumer law and foreclosure issues.

In 2015, Brown received the National Consumer Law Center's Vern Countryman Award for special contributions in the area of consumer law.

The Michigan State Bar Foundation provides leadership and grants to improve access for all to the justice system, including support for civil legal aid to the poor, law-related education, and conflict resolution. For more information, visit www.msbf.org.

Respected Advocate Awards—Each year, the Michigan Association for Justice and the Michigan Defense Trial Counsel present a Respected Advocate Award to promote mutual respect and civility. The MAJ gives the award to a member of the defense bar for the purpose of recognizing and honoring the individual's history of successful representation of clients and adherence to the highest standards of ethics. The MDTC does the same for a plaintiff's practitioner.

Michigan Association for Justice

The MAJ honored **William D. Chaklos** with its Respected Advocate Award. Chaklos is a principal with Kitch Drutchas Wagner Valitutti & Sherbrook in Detroit and has been a member of its medical malpractice defense team since 1981. He has devoted his practice exclusively to the defense of professional liability claims with a focus on the post-acute care industry and hospital and physician malpractice.



Chaklos earned his juris doctor from Western Michigan University Cooley Law School and his bachelor's degree in business administration from Michigan State University. In 2017, he was named one of the Ten Best Attorneys in Michigan by the American Institute of Personal Injury Attorneys for his exceptional and outstanding client service and was recognized as one of America's Top 100 High Stakes Litigators. He is a member of the American Board of Trial Advocates.

Michigan Defense Trial Counsel

The MDTC honored **Liisa R. Speaker** with its Respected Advocate Award. Speaker owns Speaker Law Firm, an appellate boutique firm. Through her written and oral advocacy, Speaker has demonstrated a passion for developing an appellate practice that has helped her clients obtain victories in appeals ranging from custody disputes to no-fault automobile insurance litigation to real property cases and probate appeals.



Speaker earned her juris doctor at the University of Texas School of Law and her bachelor's degree in political science and Spanish at Trinity University. In 2009, Speaker received the Distinguished Brief Award from the Cooley Law Review. She was appointed by the Michigan Supreme Court to two four-year terms on the Court Reporter and Recorder Board of Review. She is a past chair of the State Bar of Michigan Appellate Practice Section and immediate past president of the Ingham County Bar Association.