

# Citizen Lawyers: Michael Pitt and Peggy Goldberg Pitt

By Margaret A. Costello

What makes a lawyer—or in this case, a pair of lawyers—go above and beyond with their extensive lifetime contributions of service and financial resources to community causes? Peggy Goldberg Pitt answers simply by stating that she grew up in a Jewish family and always “felt blessed and was taught that the more fortunate have an obligation to give back.” She describes that, as a child, she heard stories of how her grandfather, a Milwaukee fruit peddler, would anonymously leave food on doorsteps of the needy during the Great Depression.

Peggy’s husband and law partner, Michael, grew up in Detroit in what he described as a traditional Jewish middle-class family. His father operated a small business and his mother ran the household. Michael’s father was charitable to a fault, often making room



Michael Pitt and Peggy Goldberg Pitt

in his business for those in need of a job. He frequently said that the gift of a job is the highest form of charity, for it enables the recipient to become self-reliant.

Peggy and Michael, who have been married for 45 years and law partners for 26 years, grew up in families that lived and practiced the tradition of what is known in Jewish culture as *tzedakah*, a Hebrew word literally translated to “justice” or “righteousness” but commonly used to reference

charity. *Tzedakah* is perhaps the most important obligation Judaism imposes on its followers. As citizen lawyers, the Pitts exemplify *tzedakah*.

Peggy and Michael met during the turbulent 1960s as undergraduates at Michigan State University. As the anti-war movement, civil-rights struggles, and the rise of feminism began breaking down the post-war establishment, the Pitts looked for life pathways that were compatible with the new world order and would further their progressive views of how that world should be shaped.

After receiving her master’s degree in education from Oakland University, Peggy was instrumental in helping develop a unique program that successfully taught illiterate workers off the line at several Detroit-area auto plants; she also taught middle-school-aged non-readers in Detroit Public Schools for several years. Her experience as a teacher made her acutely aware of issues of hunger, housing, and lack of funding for the arts and music in the schools, and her philanthropic efforts have included organizations that address those issues.

Supported by Peggy’s teaching income, Michael entered law school in 1971. Two years of law school tuition added up to

## Citizen Lawyer

A citizen lawyer strives to attain the highest level of skill, improve the law and the legal profession, and exemplify the profession’s ideals of public service. Whether it is service for voter registration or scouting, shelters for abused persons or school activities, drafting a constitution for an emerging democracy, or solving an environmental problem, lawyers are in a unique position to benefit individuals and organizations. The Citizen Lawyer feature of the *Michigan Bar Journal* focuses on public-service achievements by recognizing lawyers and judges who have made an exceptional voluntary contribution to community causes. To nominate a lawyer, send his or her name and the reasons for your nomination to Margaret A. Costello at [costelma@udmercy.edu](mailto:costelma@udmercy.edu).

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quite a bit of debt, which was conveniently cancelled when the couple married in 1973.

Upon entering law school, Michael had no clue as to what shape his incipient legal career should take. In his second year at Wayne State University Law School, a friend introduced him to the law school's Free Legal Aid Clinic. At the clinic, Michael was assigned to work on landlord-tenant matters, collection cases, small general civil matters, and misdemeanors. His clients were poor, broken down, and often illiterate, but so appreciative that someone cared enough about them to be their champion. As a student lawyer representing indigent clients, Michael felt like the one-eyed man from the old saw ("in the world of the blind, the one-eyed man is king."). He soon realized that he was well-suited to represent the Davids of the world who needed someone to battle with the oppressive corporate and governmental Goliaths. His experience at the Free Legal Aid Clinic set him on a career course which he says has served him well to this day.

Peggy, too, ultimately enrolled in law school. She graduated from the University of Detroit Law School in 1979 and initially practiced criminal law.

Michael was hired in 1974 as an associate lawyer with the Detroit law firm of Kelman, Loria, Downing, Schneider and Simpson. Associated with one of the leading progressive personal injury and workers' compensation firms in Michigan, he found himself surrounded by people he describes as brilliant and courageous trial lawyers who were always on the hunt for high-impact cases that would advance the firm's passion for progressive causes.

It was in that environment that Michael, in one of his earliest victories as a rookie litigator, was able to secure a permanent injunction against the state of Michigan, preventing it from invading the privacy rights of developmentally disabled recipients of state benefits. To this day, the state is subject to that injunction issued in the 1970s, and is forbidden from requiring the developmentally disabled to give up privacy rights to secure governmental benefits.

The Pitts have continued to advance the rights of the disabled through litigation and

## Michael's Achievements

- President, Public Justice Foundation, 2018–2019
- Executive Board, Public Justice, 2009–present
- President, Michigan Association for Justice, 2004–2005
- Executive Board, Michigan Association for Justice, 1992–2004
- Champion of Justice, State Bar of Michigan, 2015
- Champion of Justice, Michigan Association of Justice, 2018
- Distinguished Service Award, SBM Labor and Employment Law Section, 2016
- Trial Lawyer of the Year, Public Justice, 2008
- People's Lawyer of the Year, National Lawyers Guild, 2009
- Wade McCree Award, Federal Bar Association for the Eastern District of Michigan, 2009
- Board of Visitors, Wayne State University Law School, Executive Board
- Trustee, Michigan State Bar Foundation, 2017–present
- Fellow of the State Bar of Michigan, American Bar Association, and Oakland Bar Association
- Fellow of the American College of Labor and Employment Lawyers, 2002–present

## Peggy's Achievements

- Member, Board of Trustees, Detroit Music Hall
- Member, Forgotten Harvest Advisory Board
- Member, ACLU of Michigan Advisory Board
- Trial Lawyer of the Year, Public Justice, 2008
- Wade McCree Award, Federal Bar Association for the Eastern District of Michigan, 2009
- People's Lawyer of the Year, National Lawyers Guild, 2009
- Former Board Member, Michigan Ovarian Cancer Alliance

community activities. Both served as volunteer attorneys for Washington, D.C.-based public-interest law firm Public Justice, representing the family of baby Alex, a severely disabled child, against an insurance company that refused to provide 24-hour skilled nursing care. Peggy and Michael were able to secure a court order compelling the insurer to provide Alex with 24-hour care. Without court intervention, the baby would not have survived. Alex's family has kept in touch with the Pitts; Alex is now 25 and doing quite well in a group home.

For many years, Michael served on the Board of Directors for JARC, a premier provider of residential care for the developmentally disabled. In 2000, Peggy and Michael created a scholarship program at Wayne

State University Law School for students with disabilities, which they continue to fund. More than 25 WSU law students have received awards from the program during its 18 years of operation.

In 1992, Michael, Peggy, and Cary McGehee established their current law firm, now known as Pitt McGehee Palmer and Rivers. Michael, Peggy, and Cary set a progressive agenda for the firm that has guided its operation for the last 26 years. The Royal Oak law firm, which currently has nine attorneys, handles employment, class actions, personal injury, and criminal defense matters on behalf of individuals, primarily through contingent-fee retainer agreements. The firm's members are passionate trial lawyers who have done well by doing good.

Michael's and Peggy's generous hearts and devotion to doing for others are an inspiration to all who know and work with them.

When asked about her impression of the Pitts, McGehee responded, "As a lawyer, Michael has been a social engineer. His love and passion for the law—and using it to advance social justice and to make new law for the betterment of those who have been marginalized by society—is unparalleled. Michael's and Peggy's generous hearts and devotion to doing for others are an inspiration to all who know and work with them."

By collaborating with other civil-rights advocates in Michigan and nationwide, the Pitts' firm has participated in several landmark cases. The firm successfully represented more than 1,000 DTE employees in a class-action suit alleging age and race discrimination, resulting in a \$45 million award and permanent programmatic relief. Eighteen female prisoners alleging sexual assaults by male corrections officers received multimillion dollar judgments as a result of two lengthy jury trials and a \$100 million settlement of the underlying class-action suit. More than 500 men and women recovered upwards of \$5 million from the Saginaw County Sheriff's Department after it was found guilty of placing naked prisoners in segregation cells for hours and, in some cases, days.

Michael, collaborating with a dozen Michigan litigators, has been appointed by the federal court as co-lead interim class counsel for tens of thousands of Flint residents suing the state and private engineering defendants for property damage and personal injuries arising from the city's water crisis. In another ongoing putative class action, the firm represents potentially 40,000 Michigan residents who were falsely charged with fraud in connection with their claims for unemployment benefits. The firm also represents hundreds of current and former juvenile prisoners who were sexually assaulted while in custody, and continues to

be involved in high-impact litigation affecting fundamental and civil rights. The Pitts represent 21 victims of former USA Gymnastics and Michigan State University doctor Larry Nassar, and Michael serves as the litigation spokesperson for 37 law firms that represent 156 additional Nassar victims.

For more than four decades, Michael and Peggy have served as volunteer attorneys with the ACLU of Michigan. Kary Moss, former executive director of the ACLU of Michigan and current head of affiliate support and nationwide initiatives for the ACLU national organization, offered that "Michael and Peggy Pitt have an extraordinary commitment to human rights. The ACLU of Michigan has long depended on them as volunteer attorneys because they bring the highest level of excellence to their work. In particular, their work representing the treatment of women in prisons across Michigan has changed the culture in prisons and made them safer and more humane."

Peggy shares Michael's devotion to public-interest causes. In addition to working on prisoner and Flint water class-action litigation matters, she has litigated cases for Public Justice. She currently serves on the ACLU of Michigan Advisory Board, belongs to the National Council of Jewish Women and the National Organization of Women, and is a member of the Women Lawyers Association of Michigan. Passionate about the issue of food insufficiency, she is currently on the advisory board of Forgotten Harvest; she also is a current board member of the Detroit Music Hall.

Michael currently serves as president of Public Justice, whose staff attorneys fight against injustices such as corporations cheating consumers and using the courts to find ways to get away with it, reckless polluters, unscrupulous payday lenders, unjust employers, punitive credit-card companies, in-

humane government detention centers, dangerous food producers, and more.

The Pitts contribute financially to community causes they consider important. They have established a charitable foundation and have contributed to international human rights groups, including Doctors Without Borders and International Rescue Committee. Among the Michigan organizations that have benefitted from their charitable gifts are Wayne State University Law School, JARC, ACLU of Michigan, and the Detroit Music Hall Children's Programs for the Arts, one of the few providers of music and art education in the Detroit Public Schools. The Pitts shun publicity for their contributions; for example, they were willing to acknowledge a contribution to the ACLU Fund of Michigan only after being convinced that recognizing their contribution might motivate others to donate.

When not actively advocating for social justice, the Pitts enjoy bicycling, traveling, and spending time with their four grandchildren. They are understandably proud of their children—Jared is a lawyer in Los Angeles and Meagan is a lawyer in Denver—who have become involved in causes such as housing and homelessness, carrying on their parents' tradition of *tzedakah*.

Peggy and Michael Pitt have used their legal education and skills to improve the law and the legal profession. They have made exceptional contributions to community causes and exemplify the legal profession's ideals of public service. They are deserving of the title of "citizen lawyers." ■



*Margaret A. ("Peggy") Costello is an associate professor at the University of Detroit Mercy School of Law and was instrumental in establishing the Veterans Law Clinic in 2007.*

*An experienced litigator and mediator, she previously was a member of Dykema, where she chaired the firm's Pro Bono and Diversity committees. She is a former SBM commissioner, past president of the Detroit Bar Association and Women Lawyers Association of Michigan, and recipient of the Cummiskey Pro Bono Award.*