Genesee County Bar Association



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Letter from the Editor Leading Through Change: Returning to Purpose When Leadership Transitions Come

By Julie A. Winkfield

There is a well-known adage: "The more things change, the more they stay the same." Embedded in this idea is the truth—change is inevitable. Whether in our communities, workplaces, families, or institutions, change is a constant presence. It can feel unsettling, especially in times of political transition or changes in leadership. Such moments can create uncertainty about the stability of systems, services, and, ultimately, our daily lives.

When the time comes for a change in leadership in community support organizations and nonprofit organizations, transitions can sometimes appear to threaten the fabric or direction of the organization. Yet, when viewed with clarity and purpose, they can also reawaken the core identity of the organization itself. During times of change, those dedicated workers who remain with the organization hold a special responsibility: to remember *why* the organization exists.

Every organization—especially those in public service and nonprofit work—is founded on a guiding vision. That vision shapes its goals, principles, and commitments to the community. When leadership shifts, the most stabilizing response is not to cling to personalities, but to anchor ourselves in purpose. When necessary, those who remain with the organization must reference and return to the mission and say to themselves:

- If we exist to strengthen communities, we must continue to strengthen communities.
- If we exist to restore dignity, we must continue to restore dignity.
- If we exist to protect housing, wellness, access to justice, and human dignity, then we must continue in that work regardless of who steps into or out of leadership roles.

The mission should remain constant even as people come and go.

Leadership is not limited to those who occupy the highest position on an organizational chart. In fact, the most enduring quality of leadership is reflected in the way that people exemplify the mission in their daily work—those who show up, serve clients, advocate, teach, and problem-solve. Indeed,



Julie A. Winkfield

leadership goes far beyond titles.

In the legal community, this is especially true. Our clients come

to us in moments of confusion, crisis, or vulnerability. They look to us for guidance, clarity, and stability. Whether we are attorneys, advocates, intake specialists, paralegals, judges, or organizational staff—we are all called to lead. We lead not by authority alone, but by:

- Steadiness under stress;
- Commitment with compassion;
- Dedication to the truth of the work;
- Holding firm to ethics and purpose;
- Upholding both the letter and the spirit of the law.

Leadership is a posture of service, not simply a position of power.

To sustain itself beyond the change and continue to grow through leadership transition, an organization must be grounded in two essential elements: 1) its mission, and 2) its people.

It is the people—those who show up each day, who serve, who believe in the work—who maintain the heartbeat of the organization. Leadership changes may redirect strategy or structure, but they do not redefine the calling of the work. When we remember the people that we serve our path remains clear.

Transitions are opportunities. They invite us to reaffirm who we are, what we value, and why our work matters. They challenge us to deepen our commitment as professionals and as caretakers of the public trust.

Therefore, when leadership changes come—and they always will—let us:

- Re-ground ourselves in our mission;
- · Lead from where we stand;
- Continue the work with renewed clarity and strength.

We can move forward with integrity and hope because the purpose remains, the calling remains, the commitment remains. When purpose leads the way, every transition becomes not an interruption but a doorway toward growth.



Honoring a Gentlemen: Donald G. Rockwell

By Sherri L. Belknap

Described by Duncan Beagle as personifying "everything you want in a lawyer. He's honorable, you can trust him, he's always there to address a problem. Really, just everything you'd want in a lawyer and a leader. Any young lawyer can look up to him." No truer words have been spoken to describe the gentlemanly lawyer, Donald G. Rockwell.

Don was a proud Flint native. His parents, Gough E. and Dorothy I. Rockwell, owned a retail business in Flint where he worked. He attended Flint Community Schools and graduated from Flint Southwestern Academy. After high school, he stayed local and attended the University of Michigan—Flint where he graduated with distinction in physics. His next step, law school.

When applying to law school in 1970, Don was required to submit two letters of recommendation. His first letter was from Bush Trembley, uncle to Don's girlfriend, Diane McMillan. Looking for a second recommendation, Don met with Harry Gault, a Genesee County attorney. Don did not know Harry Gault but was fortunate enough to schedule a meeting that ended with a second letter of recommendation.²

Before starting his professional career, he made an investment in his personal life. On August 1, 1975, he married Diane McMillan. They had two children, Greg and Susan, and several grandchildren. Don and Diane were married for about 50 years.

In 1976, Don graduated from University of Detroit Mercy School of Law, cum laude, with his Juris Doctor. On November 9, 1976, he was admitted to the State Bar of Michigan and on November 16, 1976 as a member of the Genesee County Bar Association.

After his tenure as Judge Thomas C. Yeotis' clerk, he joined Smith & Brooker, P.C. as a partner, then was a partner in Nill, Rockwell, Shannon and Keene, P.C. which eventually became Nill Rockwell P.C. During his practice, he focused on products liability, employment, business, personal injury, patent, trademark and copyright areas.

In addition to his practice, Don was active with the GCBA. He was on the Board of Directors then on the Executive Committee. In 2000-2001, he was President of GCBA. While President, Don along with Jerome D. Winegarden, H. William Reising, and John P. Siler searched for GCBA's next office location. They were to determine whether GCBA rented or purchased their next office location. In August 2001, Don signed an option to purchase 315 E. Court Street and fundraising started.

In 2000, the Honorable Arthalu Lancaster retired from the 67th District Court in Flushing. Governor Engler appointed Don to the bench where he served with honor, dignity, and fairness. Prior to the 2002 election, the Centennial Inn planned

a meeting with the local judges where they were to discuss the do's and don'ts in the courtroom. Despite Don losing the election, he still participated in the event by



Sherri L. Belknap

sharing stories of his experiences while on the bench. When it was over, he received a standing ovation much to his surprise.

Don loved helping people and serving his community. In 2008, he was elected to the State Bar of Michigan Representative Assembly and over the next ten years he moved through the ranks to become the President of the State Bar of Michigan in 2017. Following his law school reference, Harry Gault, Don became the second President of the State Bar of Michigan from Genesee County.³ Don's focus was on Access to Justice.

Don never took credit for his hard work. He always shined the light on others including the staffs of GCBA and the State Bar of Michigan, fellow Genesee County attorneys Harry Gault, Brian Barkey, Duncan Beagle, and Otis Smith in his monthly State Bar President Page, and nominating Francine Cullari for the Robert P. Hudson Award. Don once said, "[n]one of this is about me—it is about serving the public.4"

Don served the public in many ways. His service included American Inns of Court Centennial Chapter Past President, University of Michigan—Flint Alumni Association (founding member and first president), Rotary Club of Flint Past Presi-



Donald G. Rockwell

dent, Community Dispute resolution Center volunteer/board, Flint Township Civil Service Commission Past President, and Carriage Town Ministries board member and secretary. He was an active participant in the GCBA Annual Holiday Dinner, using his photography skills during Law Day, and ICLE Contributor.

In remembering Don, I think of the perfect gentleman who cared about others and led our profession by example with dignity. The best way to honor Don is to remember his words: "Life should be reasonably fair in proportion to one's ability and character⁵...the law, the lawyers, and the courts in our great nation are recognized and established as the way for those who have been treated unfairly by others to peaceably seek remedy and fairness." As lawyers, Don recognized that we are entrusted in leading the future of this profession, and in doing so, ethics are paramount. "You can be the most brilliant lawyer in the history of lawyers, but if you are not ethical, you are nothing."

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November Admissions Ceremony

Congratulations to Jonathan A. Bont, Garrett M. Fridline, Courtney Hibbeln, and Sharbel J. Massoud on being admitted to the practice of law in the State of Michigan November 20, 2025. Thanks to Judge Brian S. Pickell, GCBA President Elias Fanous, GCBA Treasurer Richard Hetherington, Kyle Lawrey, Douglas Theodoroff, and Christopher Trainor for making this a memorable day!



Additional pictures can be viewed at https://flic.kr/s/aHBqjCBunF



2025 Beagle Scholarship

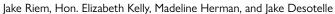
Congratulations to the 2025 Beagle Scholarship Recipients: Jake Desotelle, Madeline Herman, and Jake Riem.

Awarded by the Genesee County Bar Foundation, the Beagle Scholarship supports secondand third-year law students from Genesee County, Michigan. Established in memory of John S. Beagle, a distinguished member of the local legal community, the scholarship honors his legacy of advancing justice and reducing financial barriers for aspiring attorneys.

We commend Jake, Madeline, and Jake on this achievement and wish them continued success in their legal careers.









Jake Riem, Madeline Herman, Jake Desotelle



Madeline Herman, Duncan M. Beagle, retired judge, Jake Desotelle, and Jake Riem

Justice Denied: Horace Peterson

By Michael Manley

orace Peterson's journey through the Michigan justice system is a reminder that while the law can be a powerful tool for justice, it can also be an unyielding barrier. After being convicted of first-degree felony murder in 1973, Peterson spent 52 years in prison for a crime he didn't commit. It's a tragic outcome stemming from a legal principle that was later deemed unconstitutional — but that change in the law was not retroactively applied to Peterson. His case highlights a somber truth: justice delayed is often justice denied, especially for those without the resources to fight in court. Justice should not only be for the privileged few, it must be for all.

In 1973, Peterson, a young Black man in Flint, was convicted after a bench trial for a murder committed by an accomplice during a robbery. During the robbery, Peterson was in a separate room and prevented his accomplice from killing the business owner, an innocent witness. The law at the time held him equally culpable for the murder under the felony murder rule. This rule, however, was fundamentally altered in 1980 by the Michigan Supreme Court's landmark decision in People v. Aaron.¹

In People v. Aaron, the Court noted,

If one had to choose the most basic principle of the criminal law in general ... it would be that criminal liability for causing a particular result is not justified in

the absence of some culpable mental state in respect to that result \dots^2



Michael Manley

The court ruled that a murder conviction required proof of intent (mens rea). The Court held that malice is an essential element for any murder charge and defined malice as, "the intention to kill, the intention to do great bodily harm, or the wanton and willful disregard of the likelihood that the natural tendency of defendant's behavior is to cause death or great bodily harm." The Court, however, chose not to make the rule retroactive stating in their opinion, "This decision shall apply to all trials in progress and those occurring after the date of this opinion." The Court's analysis made it clear that Peterson's convictions violated the most basic principles of criminal law and yet chose not to provide him with a means of relief. Peterson's appeals were repeatedly denied, leaving him to serve a life sentence for a crime that, by the state's own admission, he didn't intend to commit.

After decades of appeals were exhausted, Peterson's family turned to former Judge Archie L. Hayman to seek a pardon. When Hayman joined our law firm, he brought Peterson's file with him, enlisting the help of myself and Attorney Scott Bigger. Together, we began a renewed fight for his freedom. Our legal team saw a new opportunity in the Michigan Supreme Court

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case *People v. Taylor*,⁵ which was considering whether to extend the principles of *Miller v. Alabama*⁶, to young adults to 19 years of age. Peterson was outside that age range, but our legal team hoped that a broader ruling on cruel and unusual punishment might create a path to his release. Peterson's accomplice had already been freed after *People v. Parks* ⁷extended *Miller* protections to those up to 18 years old in the State of Michigan.

During this time, the Peterson family launched their own public crusade. Peterson's daughter and grandson, prominent ESPN sportswriter Eric Woodyard, worked tirelessly to bring his story to a national audience. Their efforts, amplified by articles in *The New York Times* and local coverage from news outlets, created a groundswell of community support in Flint. This public attention, and the powerful story of a man who served a lifetime for a non-violent role in a crime, caught the attention of Genesee County Prosecutor David Leyton. Known for his commitment to fairness, Prosecutor Leyton began discussions with me on a fair resolution that sought justice for Peterson, but also the victim and her family.

Recognizing the injustice of the situation, we decided to work together to find a solution. With the looming *Taylor* decision as a backdrop, we reached a unique agreement with Prosecutor Leyton. Peterson would have his first-degree murder conviction set aside and, in turn, plead no contest to a charge of second-degree murder. The sentence would be for a term of years, with the maximum not exceeding the 52 years he had already served. Judge Brian Pickell then signed off on the agreement, and the following day, Peterson walked out of confinement, free for the first time in over half a century. He now lives with his daughter, beginning the difficult process of readjusting to a world that had moved on without him.

The case of Horace Peterson is a testament to the idea that even in an adversarial legal system, justice can prevail when people are willing to put fairness above procedure. The collaboration of the late Judge Archie L. Hayman, Attorney Scott Bigger, Prosecutor David Leyton and myself was instrumental in correcting a grave injustice. Our work, guided by a sense of fairness and humanity, ultimately gave Horace Peterson his freedom after 52 years. His story serves as a powerful reminder of how the law can fail, but also of how the people within the legal profession can work together to restore faith in its promise.

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Endnotes

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2025 Holiday Giving Project

By Brian M. Barkey

As I write this, I have just visited the Flint area shelters that participate in the Bar Association's Holiday Giving Project to help them plan this year's activities. I have been filled with love and goodwill from all of them, meant for all of you.

As you know, five years ago, we were forced by the COVID epidemic to totally change our traditional Holiday Dinner into something that would accommodate this major health crisis, and the Giving Project was invented. We contacted five area shelters to inquire how we might help their families during the holidays. We also contacted several local non-franchise restaurants and asked them to help. Everyone we spoke with was enormously grateful for our support during this difficult time, and the Holiday Giving Project was born. It has been extremely well received by our benefactors and, as always, completely supported by our members.

As you might imagine, the stress on area shelters this time of year is enormous. They are all full and have many, many hungry visitors during the day to stay warm, in addition to those who live there. To make matters worse, the recent government shutdown and funding interruption has produced a dramatic impact on this population, and area shelters have been on the front line.

We have recruited seven area shelters to host holiday parties for their residents and arranged catered meals from three local restaurants. For the children, we fund gifts selected from a gift list and arrange delivery of these gifts directly to

the shelters for distribution by their staff. Entertainment has been provided at these parties by members of the Bar Association – Jack Tubbs and Glenn Simmington, as well as other volunteers.



Brian M. Barkey

Last year I was able to go to the holiday parties at all of the area shelters, which were attended by hundreds and hundreds of people. One participant wrote a thank you note on a napkin, and I got a dozen of them by the time I left. I was floating and full of love and goodwill by the time I left. The wonderful impact of this gift by members of our Association cannot be overstated.

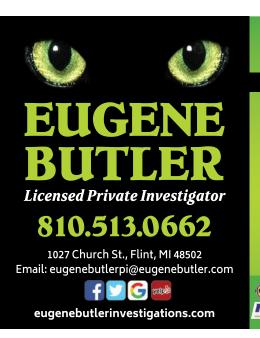
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Expanding Access to Justice: Inside the New Genesee County Legal Resource Center

By Rachel Hawrylo

The Genesee County Legal Resource Center ("LRC") has entered an exciting new chapter with the opening of its modern, accessible, and purpose-built space inside the 7th Judicial Circuit Court. This expansion is grounded in a clear mission: to make the civil legal system understandable and navigable for every person in Genesee County.

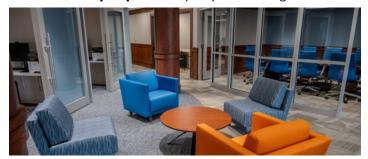
Michigan's first court connected self-help center opened in 2002, marking the beginning of a statewide effort to expand access to justice. As of December 2025, the LRC is the largest self-help center in Michigan, serving as a central hub of support for thousands of residents who would otherwise face the legal system alone.

The new LRC space features open glass, ADA accessible workstations, private consultation rooms, and technology equipped kiosks that include computers, printers, scanners, and video conferencing capabilities. The environment is intentionally designed to be welcoming and easy to navigate, blending modern function with the historic character of the courthouse.

Visitors can access Michigan Legal Help, Westlaw, informational resources, and guided assistance from trained navigators. Every element of the space supports dignity, privacy, and user empowerment, ensuring that self-represented litigants have the tools they need to move forward with confidence.

Civil legal needs are widespread across the country and in Genesee County. According to the 2022 Justice Gap Study from the Legal Services Corporation:

There is only 1 civil legal aid attorney for every
 6,883 people who qualify for free legal assistance.







Rachel Hawrylo

- 3 in 4 (74%) low income households experienced at least one civil legal problem in the past year.
- 1 in 2 (55%) low income Americans who experienced a problem reported that it substantially affected their lives including finances, mental and physical health, safety, and family stability.
- 1 in 2 (46%) who did not seek help for their legal problems said cost was a major barrier.

The LRC's own data mirrors these broader national trends. As of October 31, 2025, the LRC has assisted more than 5,000 people this year. Seventy-six percent of visitors report household incomes under **\$50,000**, showing that a majority are navigating the civil legal system without the resources to hire an attorney.

Given the overwhelming need, attorney support is more essential than ever. The LRC respectfully encourages members of the Genesee County Bar Association to join us in advancing access to justice through pro bono assistance. We are seeking GCBA volunteer support in civil, probate, and family law matters including brief advice, document review, and clinic participation.

Your involvement directly helps fill the justice gap in our community. Together, we can ensure that no resident of Genesee County has to face a civil legal issue without somewhere to turn for guidance, clarity, and support.

If you are interested in donating your time to this community, contact Rachel Hawrylo; rhawrylo@geneseecountymi. gov or 810-424-4355.





2025 Barrister's Ball: A Night in Paris

The Genesee County Bar Association's 2025 Barrister's A Night in Paris was truly a success. This year's event was held at the Genesys Conference and Banquet Center on September 20, 2025.

Guests enjoyed an evening filled with music from Intrigue, Parisian-themed activities such as caricature drawings, trivia, a scavenger hunt, and the opportunity to explore our Paris Café, Art Exhibit, and Fashion District.

Thank you to all who attended!

Thank you to our sponsors for their generous support — we couldn't have done it without you!

Thanks to our photographer, Antione Minor of Minor Photography.

Click here to view pictures from the event: https://www.flickr.com/gp/203577342@N04/2L22m1 1voB





Hidden Treasures — A Photo Essay

By LindaLee Massoud (with Samsung Galaxy S24 Ultra)

Even as we find ourselves in the deep quiet of winter, these beautiful photographs remind us that the renewal of spring is soon to come. LindaLee's lovely photo essay captures the soft purples, fresh greens, and delicate butterflies of Meijer Gardens—glimpses of the renewal that awaits us. Let these images lift your spirit and brighten your day. Winter has its own peace and purpose, but soon the blossoms will return, the gardens will awaken, and the world will unfold in color once again. Until then, allow these breathtaking scenes to offer you a moment of beauty, a touch of joy, and a gentle reminder that spring always comes.

Meijer Gardens

Grand Rapids is a straight 2-hour shot across I-69 and I-96 and only one mile off the expressway! Meijer Gardens offers a variety of habitats, as well as sculptures. Of course, butterflies are always a pleasure. (Tip: The Chihuly glass exhibit is returning in 2026!) For further information click http://meijergardens.org.





Dow Gardens

Midland's Dow Gardens is an easy hour away. The Whiting Forest is also included in the ticket price. There are both natural and cultivated garden areas. For further information click http://dowgardens.org



LindaLee Massoud









Rochester Municipal Park

If you ever get to Rochester for business or pleasure, be sure to stop at the little municipal park. It is a very popular walking, running, and biking spot for all ages. They also actively support the Monarch migration. (The one in the picture was just being released as I arrived!) Even the parking lot of the Whole Foods Market offers a lovely flower display. For further information click https://www.ci.rochester.mi.us/196/Municipal-Park









Beauty is all around, if you look for it. Mundy Miracle Commons and roadside parks have surprising finds. Keep your eyes open to Mother Nature's gifts.



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