

Michael Gilfix, CAP, Fellow Visionary Advocate for Elder and Special Needs Law

Mike is a visionary and a modern Renaissance man. Not only is he one of the founders of NAELA, but he also helped to establish and popularize the practice areas of elder law and special needs law by raising national awareness of the need for specialized legal services for older adults and persons with disabilities.

More than 35 years after helping to create the National Academy of Elder Law Attorneys, Michael Gilfix is still dedicated to and supportive of NAELA's vision, and to providing its members education and support for serving their clients.

If you search Google for the definitions of *visionary* and *Renaissance man*, you may not necessarily find a photograph of Mike, but you will find a pretty good explanation of his character:

A. Frank Johns is principal partner of Booth Harrington & Johns of NC PLLC. He is a past president of NAELA and currently serves as a board director for NAELA's North Carolina chapter.

Visionary: "(adjective) as (especially a person) one thinking about or planning the future with imagination or wisdom;" or "(noun) as a person with original ideas about what the future will or could be like."¹

Renaissance man: "(noun) a person with many talents or areas of knowledge."²

If you know the relentlessly creative Mike, you know these definitions fit him to a tee. But to truly begin to understand just how big in stature Mike is, you need to first understand how important his family and community are to him. Mike is a loving and dedicated husband to his wife, Myra Ger-

son Gilfix, and father to their three children, Mark, Shanna, and Jamie. He also is an active member of the Etz Chayim congregation of Palo Alto (California) that he and Myra created with five other couples in 1995; it now has more than 300 families.

Belying his stature, Mike is small and wiry, with more than a sprinkling of gray protruding from his massive black locks and eyebrows, betraying his boyish character and demeanor and hinting at his current age. Once an avid runner, Mike loved to run until recently when, he says, "My feet betrayed me." Until he stopped, he was clocking PRs (personal records) and winning 5K and 10K races in his age category. He still has an attitude as he participates in golf, foosball, and billiards. He is tireless in his want to succeed and attain his goals. By all measures, Mike has succeeded beyond his dreams, especially when you know from where he comes.

Mike describes his childhood as a modest upbringing. "I didn't know we were poor," he writes, but he never felt deprived. Mike grew up in East Tawas, Michigan, which is a town on Lake Huron and is as small town as you can get.³ "All my friends were financially

1 See Google <https://www.google.com/search?q=define+visionary>

2 See Google <https://www.google.com/search?q=define+renaissance+man>

3 See *News from Small Town (Tawas) middle America*, a series of articles by Michael Gilfix. "Tawas is not fictional; it is very real. It is

about the same.” Mike grew up with his parents and brother in their modest house (approximately 24 by 25 feet) before moving to northern California in the 1960s. It is noted that while Mike left Tawas, Tawas hasn’t left him. Mike, Myra, and their children created and funded a family foundation called the Holocaust Education and Awareness for Life (HEAL). HEAL has thus far awarded two grants, one to fund a project to integrate materials on hate and antisemitism into the Tawas high school curriculum.

After high school, Mike enrolled at the University of Michigan. He transferred to Stanford University two years later. That’s where he had his political awakening with a focus on civil rights and the Vietnam War era. Mike was Phi Beta Kappa (as was Myra) and graduated with distinction in 1969. His vision and advocacy began during those Stanford years when he created a campus division of the National Association for Responsible Firearms and an exchange program with Moscow State University (MGU). Mike says the MGU communication led to some amazing developments, including being monitored by J. Edgar Hoover’s FBI. From his undergraduate time at Stanford University, Mike went to Houston, Texas, to be a member of the Volunteers in Service to America (VISTA) and to be a community organizer. That’s where he fell hopelessly in love with and married Myra.

similar to Lake Wobegon in many ways—the farmers, the pastors, the community where everybody knows everybody’s business. The town of East Tawas is located on Lake Huron on the lower peninsula about 110 miles north of Flint, Michigan. The population is around 2,723. It hasn’t grown much from my childhood in the 50s and 60s.” Issue 24, January 23, 2023.



Mike Gilfix on the trail in Glacier National Park, Montana.

Mike returned to Stanford University Law School, where there was an atmosphere that pressured students to pursue financial rewards. Paying no attention to the pressure, Mike went in a different direction, creating a nonprofit organization right out of law school when he graduated in 1973. He at the time rejected offers to make big bucks at large law firms. Additionally, in 1973, Mike created the first free legal services program for “seniors” in the nation, called Senior Adults Legal Assistance (SALA). True to his altruism and political beliefs at the time, Mike’s salary was kept at the same level as his secretary. Mike ran SALA for 10 years, while at the same time creating one of the first legal programs for persons with disabilities called the Disability Law Center (DLC). He also at that time published one of the first newsletters focused on disability and the law, Addressing Legal issues of Physically Handicapped Adults (ALPHA). See why Mike truly fits the definition of visionary?

In 1973, Mike created the first free legal services program for “seniors” in the nation, called Senior Adults Legal Assistance (SALA).

But that was only the beginning. Mike and a few others provided testimony before the Senate Special Committee on Aging where the subject was “Improving Legal Representation for Older Americans.” At that point, such representation was virtually unheard of, with the exception of SALA and two other programs. As a result of Mike’s efforts, in the same year SALA was funded by the Administration on Aging as a model project. Mike ran

SALA, authored articles and training manuals for the model project, and proselytized all over the nation about the need for legal services for older adults. This was more than a decade before the start of NAELA.

What follows are just a few of Mike's major published articles and lectures for countless organizations and important accomplishments:

- 1978 DePaul Law Review article, "Minority Elders: Victims of Double Discrimination in Public and Private Benefit Plans."⁴
- Attended the White House Conference on the Handicapped as an invited expert in 1984.
- Together with Myra and about three dozen other aging advocates, founded NAELA in 1987.
- One of the first NAELA Fellows (1989) and an original member of the NAELA Council of Advanced Practitioners (CAP).
- Co-authored with Myra Gerson Gilfix NAELA's first U.S. Supreme Court amicus brief filed in *Cruzan v. Director, Missouri Dep't of Health*, 497 U.S. 261 (1990).
- Has spoken at countless NAELA events and national estate planning conferences on Medicaid, tax, multi-generational planning, office management, and other topics.
- Prof. John Regan, author of the seminal *Tax, Estate & Financial Planning for the Elderly*, and for whom the NAELA Writing Award is named, asked Mike to co-author "the" second volume for elder law attorneys: *Tax, Estate & Financial Planning for the Elderly: Forms and*

⁴ Michael Gilfix, "Minority Elders: Victims of Double Discrimination in Public and Private Benefit Plans," 27 DePaul L. Rev. 383 (1978). Available at: <https://via.library.depaul.edu/law-review/vol27/iss2/5>

Mike is the recipient of the 2019 Ruth Bader Ginsburg Award by the Jewish Bar Association of San Francisco for his formative work in the fields of elder law and special needs planning.

Practice. Mike co-authored with John until he passed in 1995. The two-volume set is still updated annually with Profs. Rebecca Morgan, David English, and Amos Goodall.

- Mike is the recipient of the 2019 Ruth Bader Ginsburg Award by the Jewish Bar Association of San Francisco for his formative work in the fields of elder law and special needs planning.
- Mike and Myra are joint recipients of the 2020 Theresa Award, which is an annual award presented by the Theresa Alessandra Russo Foundation to NAELA members in recognition of their outstanding efforts and advocacy for individuals with special needs.
- Mike continued his robust family activities, including 13 consecutive years coaching girls' basketball, and coaching baseball, boys' basketball, and soccer.

Mike acknowledges and is proud of Myra's own academic prowess as a graduate from Stanford Law, and of their partnership in so many of the important milestones in their professional careers. It was in 1983 that they created what is now Gilfix & La Poll Associates LLP, a successful multigenerational eight-attorney firm.

The list of Mike's impressive accolades goes on and on, but the last comment about family is a good segue to share comments by Myra, Shanna,

Mark, and Jamie about their beloved husband and father.

When I called Myra to ask for her comments, she said that when Mike met her in Houston, she was a student. The more he was around her, the more insistent he was that she marry him — she said he wouldn't take no for an answer. She fondly recalls the years that followed, adding Mark, Shanna, and Jamie to the family, and the loving chaos that surrounded their home in Palo Alto. One poignant anecdote she shared was back in the early years when they were brainstorming just what to call the seniors for whom they were advocating. She remembers that a friend, who was Presbyterian, mentioned that the name of a Presbyterian elected leader was an "elder" — from whence came the precursor of naming NAELA.

When I spoke with Shanna, she recalled that Mike always made time for her throughout her childhood. She remembers, as he was starting his firm, she would call the office to speak with him. If he was busy, he would ask if it was an emergency — it never was, but he would be quick to call her back. She also remembers that her dad was always at home right after 5 p.m. to be with the family.

Mark echoed the same sentiments about his dad. No matter how busy he was dealing with organizations or building the law firm, Mike always



The Gilfix Family: Mark Gilfix, NAELA Fellow Myra Gerson Gilfix, Mike, Shanna Gilfix, and Jamie Gilfix West.

had time for them. He and Mike constantly ran together, and for more than 20 consecutive years they both ran the San Francisco “Bay to Breakers.”⁵ I asked Mark if he remembered the first race when he finally beat Mike. He said it was probably when he was 17 or 18, in the Bay to Breakers run — toward the end, Mark pulled away from Mike, ending the race ahead of him. He said Mike took a Zen attitude and shared his support, although he was certain that Mike was saying “damn” under his breath.

Jamie expressed the same loving sentiments about Mike, stating that even now Mike will call her just to talk and be supportive of her and his grandson Miles.⁶ She was quick to remember how Mike has been reciting

his two favorite Shakespearean sonnets to Miles at bedtime.

Mike and Myra are so proud of their kids: Mark is practicing with Gilfix & La Poll Associates as an attorney; Jamie is working with a startup in San Francisco; and Shanna is working in the Gilfix & La Poll firm, and as a singer/songwriter. Mike mentioned the sweet anecdote of when he and Myra put Miles, their grandson, to bed. Myra, who is an accomplished singer, reads him a book and sings to him and Mike recites his two favorite Shakespearean sonnets as Miles melloes into his crib. Mike joins Jamie in the expectation that Miles will have one sonnet memorized by the time he is five.

In addition to spending time with his beloved family, Mike’s current joys include walking with Myra, shooting baskets (60% free-throw rate), golfing, hiking, writing, and reading — he currently reads three books at any

given time.⁷ He also looks forward to a five-day High Sierra backpacking trip he and a friend have booked for August.

As a firm believer and excellent embodiment of the NAELA tenet, doing well by doing good, Mike finished his interview (as is indicative of his character) by expressing his concern about hate and antisemitism, which has him and Myra putting their money behind their political activism that supports many candidates at the federal level. Their law firm is vibrant. They continue their advocacy for improving the lives of older adults and persons with disabilities. ■

5 San Francisco’s Bay to Breakers is the oldest consecutively run annual 12K footrace in the world, a staple of the “city by the bay” since May 1912.

6 They all had more to share, but I am running out of space.

7 When asked to write this article about Mike, I was quick to accept. Mike and I have had a long-distance friendship for over 30 years (Anne and I have fond memories of the times we’ve enjoyed being in the Gilfix home and sharing their joys). I have many times confirmed Mike as a kindred spirit, and even more, my brother of a different mother.