



Steve Fineman (2011-2012)

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Steve Fineman: My name is Steve Fineman. I'm the Managing Partner at Lieff Cabraser Heimann & Bernstein, resident in the New York office. I was on the Public Justice Board from 2002 to 2018. I was the president in 2011 and '12, and I was a member of the executive committee of the board from 2006 to 2015.

[Sandy Dumain: How did you first get involved with Public Justice?]

Steve: I got involved in the late 1990s when my friend Rob Gordon, a partner at Weitz & Luxenberg, introduced me to the organization. He was longtime friends with the head of Public Justice, Arthur Bryant, at the time. I started participating in Public Justice events, meetings. I liked that I could contribute to the public interest in a non-for-profit context. I got more and more involved in organization to the point where, in 2002, I was asked to join the board.

[Sandy: Do you have any sense of how big Public Justice was in those days?]

Steve: In that period, 2002 to '18, we grew in membership, in the size of the staff, the scope of the work, the budget got a lot bigger and our ambition, obviously, got a lot bigger, as well. We changed our name to reflect an increasingly broad constituency and expanding in diverse caseload. We opened the West Coast office.

Our website, social media presence, fundraising, all became more sophisticated and larger. Our annual galas became huge. They weren't so grand back in the day and over time, they became must-attend events, featuring amazing speakers. We had a President of the United States at one of our events.

The [Trial Lawyer of the Year Award](#) became one of -- if not *the* -- most prestigious and coveted recognitions of plaintiffs' bar. And of course, we transitioned from Arthur Bryant to Paul Bland as the head of the organization. I saw a lot of change and expansion over the years I was involved.

[Sandy: I'm forever grateful that you recruited me to the Public Justice Board, which has been an incredibly rewarding experience.]

Steve: It's interesting because I'm actually responsible for having recruited a number of leaders over the years. Eric Cramer, for example, the immediate past president. Tom Sobol, a longtime board member and executive committee member. I recruited well.

[Sandy: When did you first get involved in being an officer of the organization?]

Steve: Pretty soon after I started, I was involved in creating the Class Action Preservation Project (CAP). I had a concern about some tension between lawyers who handled primarily personal injury cases and lawyers who are handling class cases. In those days, there was a little bit of a conflict.

Public Justice had been involved in a number of class cases, civil rights cases, public interest cases. With some others, we created CAP for the purpose of promoting and supporting class action practice and serve the interests of consumers, investors, victims of civil rights abuses, and so on. And that, I think, raised my profile within the board and within leadership, and then that lead to me going on the executive committee, first, I believe, in 2006.

[Sandy: When you became president, did you have anything in particular you wanted to accomplish in your one-year term?]

Steve: When I became president, what we wanted to accomplish was to try to professionalize the operation a little bit. I don't mean that pejoratively. I just mean, by that point, we had grown into a different organization than we had been a decade earlier. Things like best accounting practices, best supervision of the law firm practices, best fundraising practices, best management practices are all things that we felt could be improved, and with support of the staff, that's what we tried to do during that time period. And I was building on what Harry Deitzler had done before me and Jack Landskroner, my dear late friend Jack Landskroner did the same thing as he succeeded me. And so on.

[Sandy: One thing I've always been curious about -- how did the tradition start of presidents the year after their immediate past presidency is over, then leaving the board?]

Steve: Our role in the board, has evolved over the last few years. I can't really speak to what the thinking is behind it. I think, certainly, I found when I was the chair and I had past presidents both on the executive committee and around me – so I'm thinking of Harry Deitzler and Mona Wallace and Jeff Goldberg, Al Brayton. Gerson Smoger. I found all of those people to be incredibly helpful in making decisions. And I found their contributions at board meetings to be extraordinarily helpful.

[Sandy: At some point, I noticed that you were no longer around board meetings, and then a lot of your successors were no longer around board meetings.]

Steve: I had been around a long time. To be on any board for that long, so many years, is long enough. I got to a point where I felt it was time for other people's voices to be heard. I've stayed involved. I continue to raise money for the organization. I frequently speak with Paul Bland and other members of the board. I just think that there comes a time when it's time to let the next generation and people who haven't had so much airtime have their moment.

[Sandy: Where do you think Public Justice is headed?]

Steve: I think that the talent level on the board is also extraordinary. I think, what's been impressive to watch over the years of Public Justice is how we've been able to continually nurture and bring on new fantastic board members, and how board members who have been around a little bit, have graduated into leadership positions on the board in the organization. As long as that continues, as long as you have amazing lawyers, as long as you have stellar leadership from Paul Bland and others, I think there's no reason why the organization can't continue to be successful and grow.

[Sandy: Looking back on your whole history of involvement in Public Justice, how would you sum it up in terms of what it's meant to you?]

Steve: I break it into really two significant parts. On the one hand, it's been an extraordinary privilege to be able to contribute to this amazing organization that is doing such extraordinary work for the public good and the public interest.

Having had the opportunity to be a leader of that organization in different capacities, whether it was leading CAP, or being a board member, or being on the executive committee, or serving as president, was a real honor and a real pleasure to do.

The second thing is that I made extraordinary lifelong friendships with the people that I worked with over the years in the organization. That's a special thing and it's not every professional environment you go into, do you come out of it with relationships that have such meaning.

[Sandy: Do you mind talking about Jack for a few minutes?]

Steve: [Jack Landskroner](#) was a dear friend of mine, dating back to before I was president. It was relatively early in my tenure on the board when Jack joined the board, a lawyer from Cleveland. Jack and I hit it off almost immediately as kindred spirits. We became very close over the years. He succeeded me as the president, and I served under him during his administration.

We remained friends after our Public Justice days. Our families were friends. My wife, Lori and I traveled with Jack and Heather and spent some holidays with them. We're very dear friends. Jack, a couple of years ago, became very ill with cancer. [He passed away in 2021](#). His memorial, which was in Cleveland, was an extraordinary event. There were a number of Public Justice people there. Paul Bland, Dan Bryson, Esther Berezofsky, Roger Mandel, and some others.

It was a great opportunity to honor his life and recognize what a complete force of nature Jack was -- loved life, loved his friends, had the uncanny ability to make any person he was with feel like they were the most important person to him, which is a rare gift. Jack will be sorely missed, not only by me, of course, but by all of his friends and every- body who knew him.

[Sandy: Thinking back to your early days with Public Justice, who were some of the presidents who were of -- for lack of a better term -- the generation before you who really stood out in your mind?]

Steve: My immediate predecessors: Harry Deitzler, Mona Wallace, Jeff Goldberg, Al Brayton, Gerson Smoger -- they were all influential. They were all helpful. I learned a lot from them all. When I was just getting going with Public Justice in the late 90s/ early 2000s, Mike Withey always stood out to me as somebody who has had a lot of positive energy and incredible contributions to make.

I also learned a lot from people who came after me. [Esther Berezofsky](#), for example, was a very good friend and companion to have around the time during my presidency. She was great. Gave great advice to me.

[Brad Moore](#), another wonderful president who I learned a lot from, even before he became president. I'm sure I'm missing others, but those are some of the people who really stand out.

Some of the original founders -- I didn't really know a lot of them that well because by time I was president in 2011-'12, the organization had been around for quite a while. Some of the early presidents, I didn't know. Some of the more famous people who started the organization -- Joan Claybrook was not a president, but she was one of the

original people who was always present during the years I was involved in. I enjoyed learning from her and talking to her and arguing and debating with her quite a bit.

[Sandy: Looking back on your tenure, what strikes you most significantly about it?]

Steve: One of the highlights of any board meeting was always the presentation by our clients - the staff attorneys coming to a meeting, bringing a client who would tell their story in their words. Those experiences were always very moving and it reminded us why we're doing what we're doing.