

Judge Richard B. Teitelman, 2008 Ethical Society of St. Louis Humanist of the Year

Judge Richard B. Teitelman presently is one of seven judges who sit on the Missouri Supreme Court. He was appointed to this position in February 2002 following four years of service as a judge on the Missouri Court of Appeals Eastern District. His legal career prior to becoming a judge was devoted to providing access to high quality civil legal services for the poor, first as the managing attorney of Legal Services of Eastern Missouri's consumer law unit and then, for 18 years, as the executive director of the agency.



In 1975 he began his career at Legal Services of Eastern Missouri (LSEM). In 1980 Judge Teitelman took the helm of LSEM, an organization with a proud history and mission but one which at that time was not very well regarded or financially supported by the general community in St. Louis. During his tenure the agency went from one which had a very young inexperienced staff with tenuous standing in the legal community to an extremely well respected organization. Under his leadership LSEM began to retain experienced expert staff and attract hundreds of volunteer lawyers to effectively represent the indigent in a large variety of civil cases. Legal Services of Eastern Missouri now enjoys an excellent reputation and the respect and support of the legal community including, in many cases, those serving as adverse counsel. In 1998, following his appointment to the Missouri Court of Appeals, he left the agency in its own renovated building, purchased with funds from a million dollar capital campaign raised from the St. Louis community, and a thriving Volunteer Lawyer Program.

In his ten years on the bench, Judge Teitelman has written many decisions which have affected thousands of Missouri citizens from all walks of life. Some of these decisions have drawn the ire of several special interest activist organizations which targeted him in a campaign to remove him from the bench. This negative campaign was seen by many as related to the 2003 decision in the case of Joseph Amrine, death row prisoner, convicted of murder in 1986. In the years following his conviction, Mr. Amrine's appellate counsel was able to establish that he did not commit the murder by bringing forward "clear and convincing evidence of actual innocence."

In 2003 the Missouri Supreme Court heard their argument which acknowledged that they had conclusively established their client's innocence after the 1986 trial and that they were not alleging defects in the trial process itself. The prosecution's argument was that because Mr. Amrine had received a fair trial with no defects in the process, the Missouri Supreme Court did not have jurisdiction to act in the case. The prosecution urged the court to execute Mr. Amrine even if it found him to be innocent. David Camp, a former law clerk for Judge Teitelman said: "Many times I have heard Judge Teitelman, when faced with a difficult decision, invoke the famous words, 'let justice be done, though the heavens may fall.' Judge Teitelman's commitment to this lofty principle was evident when he wrote the opinion in the case of Joseph Amrine. At the time Judge Teitelman must have known that it would be controversial and that it would be issued just before he would face a state-wide retention vote."

Judge Teitelman is from Philadelphia, Pennsylvania where he was born in 1947, the youngest of three sons. His mother, in very poor health during his childhood, was a teacher who successfully instilled her values around education in him. Today, as a result of hard fought battles of disability rights groups, our

laws afford employment protections for those who are ill. In 1952 however, when Judge Teitelman's mother was fired because she had breast cancer, those protections did not exist. His father was an attorney who managed a family apartment building in which they lived. The Teitelman family was greatly enriched both socially and intellectually by the life-long friendship between Judge Teitelman's father and the brilliant legendary Judge Leon Higgenbotham (civil rights activist, author of the scholarly treatise *In the Matter of Color* and in 1961, the first African-American appointed to the United States District Court for the Eastern District of Pennsylvania).

The diverse neighborhood in which Judge Teitelman grew up was in the shadow of the University of Pennsylvania which he attended for mathematics coursework beginning in his sophomore year in high school. Although identified as legally blind by the age of 13 and required to take remedial English since reading posed a challenge to him, he received no special services or assistance. While the disability of visual impairment was formidable, Judge Teitelman had or developed other exceptional abilities which enabled him to excel in subjects requiring critical thinking, logic and mathematics. By the time he graduated from high school he had completed all undergraduate requirements for his degree in mathematics at the University of Pennsylvania. His first choice for a profession was medicine, however he was actively discouraged from this pursuit due to his visual impairment. Fortunately for the citizens of Missouri, his second choice was law and the school he chose was Washington University School of Law.

Following his graduation in 1973 he began his practice. Many of his clients were United Farm Workers and their supporters, charged with misdemeanor offenses stemming from their participation in protests and boycotts to improve wages and conditions. Through his contact with an economically disadvantaged clientele, he became familiar with their many civil legal needs which he has never forgotten. In a recent American Bar Association Commission interview he said "The law can help provide equal access to justice and help those who could not receive the basic needs in life - food, shelter, and an education. I want to be that ear on the court that hears the pleas of the not-so-fortunate and makes sure they too receive justice." We are indeed fortunate to have a jurist of Judge Teitelman's caliber on our state supreme court and the Ethical Society of St. Louis is proud to honor him today.