SUMMER 2020

Meet

Michael and Myra Gilfix,
2020 Theresa Award Honorees

You’ve heard of power couples. We’d like to introduce you to the Empower Couple, attorneys Michael and Myra Gilfix. Since the very beginning of their careers, Michael and Myra have devoted themselves to empowering elders and individuals with disabilities, protecting patients’ rights, and tirelessly advocating for the most vulnerable among us. They are shining examples of what the Theresa Awards are all about.

In 1974, the U.S. Senate began hearings focused on legal representation for seniors. As one of the few attorneys with any experience in this area, Michael was asked to testify at the hearings. This resulted in the award of a federal grant to establish “model” programs providing legal representation to elders. Michael traveled the country speaking at conferences and local seminars, educating thousands of attorneys and other professionals about the importance of what eventually became known as Elder Law. (Michael and Myra even created and trademarked the term “Elder Law” in the early 80’s, but eventually donated it to NAELA so NAELA would have unlimited use of the term.)

During this time, in 1976 to be exact, Michael and Myra also founded The Disability Law Center. It was one of the first organizations in the country to provide free legal services for individuals with disabilities. As a pioneer in this area, Myra developed the legal language for some of the very first Special Needs Trusts created in California.

Myra graduated from the Stanford Law School in 1976. She went to work as a volunteer patient advocate at Our Health Center, a community clinic in Santa Clara County. She served on its Board of Directors and continued her passion for enhancing patients’ rights.

Upon graduating from Stanford Law School, Michael and Myra could have become well-paid associate attorneys at any number of prestigious law firms. Fortunately for all of us, they chose a different path.

In 1973, Michael graduated from Stanford and created Senior Adults Legal Assistance with full support of his then-law student wife. It was the first program in the country dedicated to providing free legal services to elders. For ten years, Michael ran this program which is still going strong.

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In 1987, along with a prescient group of attorneys that included Vincent J. Russo, Michael and Myra co-founded NAELA with the mission to educate, inspire, serve, and provide community to attorneys with practices in elder law and special needs planning. NAELA currently has nearly 4,000 members across the United States, Canada, Australia, and the United Kingdom.

In the late 1980s, Michael and Myra took on two crucial patients’ rights cases. First, in 1988, they successfully litigated California’s signature “right-to-die” case, In Re Drabick. This case made important law in the area of independence and medical decision making.

Then, in 1989, the U.S. Supreme Court heard its first right-to-die case, Cruzan v. Director, Missouri Department of Health. Nancy Cruzan had been diagnosed as being in a persistent vegetative state. She was on life support and needed a feeding tube. The petitioners, Nancy and her parents, wanted the feeding tube removed, which would in essence allow Nancy to pass away. Michael and Myra coauthored the Brief Amicus Curiae for NAELA on behalf of the petitioners. Cruzan proved to be a landmark case and ultimately led to the creation of advance health directives. And who was instrumental in creating the language that we use today in living wills and advance directives? History and a review of conference materials and writings point to Myra Gilfix.

Among his many books and other published works, in 1991 Michael co-authored with Professor John Regan the widely used form book Tax, Estate, and Financial Planning for the Elderly: Forms and Practice. As one would expect, Myra wrote the chapter on health care decision making.

Myra, consistently a step ahead, continues to support and create practical tools for family members to serve as empowered patient advocates, particularly in hospital settings.

Oh, lest we forget, along the way Michael and Myra somehow found time to create a law firm in 1983. Gilfix & La Poll Associates, LLP is now one of the largest and most respected elder law firms in the country. Over the course of 35-plus years, the firm has protected the safety and well-being of thousands of elders and individuals with disabilities… a mission that is more important now than ever as we navigate the Coronavirus pandemic.

For all that they have done to protect elders, individuals with disabilities, and patients’ rights, the Theresa Foundation is pleased to present Michael and Myra Gilfix with the 2020 Theresa Award.
For almost 10 years, Southampton Fresh Air Home (SFAH)’s art, dance, music and drama program has thrived thanks to the continued support of the Theresa Foundation.

The Southampton Fresh Air Home gives special children, regardless of their ability to pay, a chance to be just like other kids who attend summer camp. The home’s unique adapted programs are similar to those of traditional sleep away camps: swimming, sailing, tennis, basketball, hockey, arts and crafts, music, computers, bonfires, cooking, dance, drama, and games.

The Theresa Foundation has awarded multiple grants to support this program, most recently in 2019, which provided arts and crafts workshops and classes in dance and drama during the 2019 summer camp season. The consistent support from the Theresa Foundation enabled SFAH to offer all programs without regard for each child’s ability to pay.

The priorities of the Theresa Foundation are closely in line with the mission of SFAH, and it has been our true honor to partner with them in bringing so much joy to hundreds of children and young adults with physical disabilities.

For the past two years, it has been my privilege, as a traveling special education art teacher, to receive TAPA@ grants to teach local students of the Long Beach High School LifeSkills program at the VFW hall in Lido Beach, as well as adult students at CP Nassau Learning Center in Roosevelt.

The experience has been fulfilling in ways I did not imagine. Interfacing with remarkable people, beginning at your executive level with your superlative Susan Russo, who welcomed me with enormous respect, warmth and generosity, through the weekly focus on “our” amazing students, brought me great joy and new journeys in personal growth. All our students, dealing with a wide range of developmental neurologic and physical challenges, ranging in age from 14 to 82, share an impressive willingness to work on refining their skills and trying new ones, most battling short attention spans and many with limited hand skills.

As a TAPA@ teaching artist I was allowed to create my own plans. I developed projects to the needs of individual and group learning. It motivated me to maintain a maximal level of enthusiasm, as I looked forward to trying out my latest project invention or discovery to excite, teach and very importantly, to relax my students, often with fun new materials provided by the foundation. In addition to the usual drawing, painting and clay work, we ventured into sewing, woodworking, tie-dying, pool noodle sculpting, collaging, stenciling, banner-making and crossed into writing, music and history as well. Of course I encouraged their own creativity, even when projects required attending to a step by step approach, and their imaginative and fun responses were endlessly enjoyable to witness. You begin to “live for” their smiles.

The partnership with the Theresa Foundation has been excellent, both on a personal and professional level, and I look forward to its continuance, post-Covid. May everyone come through this healthy and appreciative of all that we have.
SAVE THE DATE

Swinging Fore Theresa Golf Outing
10:00 am check-in
12:00 pm Shot Gun Tee Off

23rd ANNUAL
Swingin’ Fore Theresa

Gala Reception
5:30 pm

Thursday, October 8, 2020
North Hills Country Club
Manhasset, NY