

Park Tower Profile

Martha Mills, Retired Judge, Advocate for Restorative Justice

by Bob Shamo



Among our 1,000+ Park Tower residents are a few whose careers have brought them to prominence in Chicago and beyond. The Honorable Martha Mills is one such, and she graciously joined me for an interview on an early summer afternoon.

Judge Mills retired from the Circuit Court of Cook County in 2012. By that time, she had worked on Wall Street, practiced law in Mississippi, engaged with national leaders on civil rights, established a private law practice in Chicago – and been appointed to the Circuit Court.

Along the way, Martha (as she is known in the building) developed a consuming interest in restorative justice, a method of bringing together those in conflict with the goal being to achieve a reconciliation acceptable to all. More on that later.

Martha's military family moved around until her dad was sent overseas, and then settled in Chicago. When the time came, she chose Macalester College – the least restrictive rules for women! – and then received her law degree from nearby University of Minnesota. Upon graduation, she hit the jackpot, becoming the first woman lawyer with a large Wall Street law firm.

That firm had been instrumental in forming the Lawyers Committee for Civil Rights Under Law, and it sent Martha to the Mississippi chapter for a month as a volunteer. Realizing the need for lawyers there, but unable to get a leave of absence from the firm, she began working with the Lawyers' Committee full time.

In Mississippi, Martha's team often argued that specific civil rights cases could not be pursued legally because blacks had not been included in jury selection.

We would invariably lose at the county level and then appeal to the Mississippi Supreme Court, which on those kinds of cases was really quite good. We won all those cases, but it was a very slow process.

One of the Lawyers Committee's more spectacular wins, with Martha as one of the trial attorneys, was a jury verdict in federal court, worth over a million dollars, against several individuals and the secret White Knights of the Ku Klux Klan for the murder of a black man. To the Committee's knowledge, it was the nation's first such verdict.

Martha went on to become chief counsel in a newly-opened Lawyers Committee office in Cairo, Illinois. When that office was repurposed a few years later, she came to Chicago and practiced law privately, both with large firms and on her own, until first being appointed to the Circuit Court of Chicago.

Yes, Martha was appointed twice, first by the Illinois Supreme Court in 1995, and again in 2007. During her two tenures, she heard cases of all sorts but remembers most vividly serving on the child protection court, and later supervising the parentage court.

I liked being a judge. It was intellectually satisfying and nice to hear both sides of the case without having to represent either. I enjoyed dealing with young lawyers and even liked cases in which litigants represented themselves, without the assistance of a lawyer.

Which brings us to the pilot restorative justice program Judge Mills started while serving on the court. She found it especially useful to allow parents, children and other family members to resolve issues and learn to communicate effectively. (Readers will find a primer on restorative justice on the next page.)

Since retiring from the court, Martha has devoted many hours to establishing

restorative justice programs and training their leaders. Law enforcement agencies use the method, as do schools to resolve student conflicts.

Martha and her husband, Patrick, moved to Park Tower after finishing her tenure on the court. Having lived nearby, they wanted to stay close but needed to relocate to a building with elevators. Indeed, they have kept their old friends and even made new ones. They find the staff friendly and efficient, and Martha particularly appreciates the Health Club.

As we finished, Martha recounted a favorite story.

Minnesota Fish Houses


Many Minnesota families build fish houses for use on frozen lakes. One Fall, a group of boys found and trashed a group of them stored on land during the off-season.

Wanting to try the restorative justice approach, juvenile authorities secured agreement from the boys, their parents, and the fish house owners to enter into a Peacemaking Circle. After the boys had explained their motivation as best they could, answered questions, and so forth, it was the fish house owners' turn to speak.

One particularly angry owner designated his adult son to speak in his place. The son described how he, his dad and brothers had fished there every winter, bought goofy gadgets for it, told jokes and stories about it all year long. It had meant so much to the entire family.

The agreed-upon resolution required the boys to pay a small sum toward damages and to perform community service alongside adults from their community. As the Circle dialogue concluded, all were invited to comment on the process. The angry owner said the following:

"I'm not happy this incident happened. On the other hand, had my son not spoken, I might never have known how important the fish house was to him and his brothers. When this is over, and these kids have done everything they said they would do, I'd like to invite them and their dads to come and spend some time with us at our fish house."

And that's exactly how it worked out. 

Restorative Justice, a Primer

Restorative Justice is not a new idea. In Navajo and other American Indian cultures, it was more important for individuals to be healed and reintegrated into their communities than to punish them.

As usually practiced today, restorative justice participants sit in a circle, becoming members of the Peacemaking Circle.

A Circle Keeper – who participates in the Circle but has no say in its decisions – will have explored the issues members wish to be addressed by the Circle. He or she will have spoken individually to each Circle member, explaining the process, answering questions, and getting a sense of personal attitudes and limitations that might make resolution difficult. Never does the Circle Keeper suggest solutions!

Dialogue begins with members deciding what values they want to govern their Circle – most often, honesty, safety, respect, truthfulness, and the like.

Key to a successful dialogue is the Talking Piece, a small object – perhaps one having special significance to this issue – that is passed from one to another member. When you have the Talking Piece, you may speak; when you don't, you have the privilege of listening.


If it comes your turn, but you do not want to speak, then you pass the Talking Piece on to the next person. Thus, everyone has an uninterrupted chance to speak, with the rhythm of dialogue encouraging both honesty and active listening.

The goal of restorative justice is to resolve the matter at hand in a civil and respectful manner. When successful, all the individuals involved are strengthened, never diminished, and the skills imparted – communication and problem-solving – are available next time they are needed to resolve a challenging issue.

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Committee Focus

Ad hoc Committee to Review the Rules & Regulations

The Association's [Rules & Regulations Handbook](#) was last edited in 2015. This new committee will recommend to the Board updates, clarifications and perhaps additions to our Rules and Regulations in light of current PTCA needs and practices. An example would be the new Package Room, where guidelines have been posted and now need to be added to the Handbook. We hope to complete our work in October. **Jean Shamo, Board liaison** 

Home Improvement Committee


Delivery is expected any day now of additional furnishings for our 2nd Floor Deck & Garden, bringing to **15** the number of lounge recliners, **18** side chairs, **2** large dining tables, **2** small dining tables, and **7** end tables.

At the time of this writing, it appeared that the mounting of sample hallway light fixtures on the 55th floor has been finished. Ballots will now be prepared for Owners who wish to express a preference for one or another of those three fixtures, the results to determine which is purchased in quantity and installed in all the other hallways. Owners may pick up a ballot – one per unit owned – in the Management Office or from the doorman. Balloting will end on October 1

Home Improvement Committee meetings are posted and open to Owner participation. **Michael Parrie, Board liaison.**

Edgewater Arts

Chicago Conspiracy Trial: One Jurer's Ordeal

This trial is the focus of a new exhibit at the [Edgewater Historical Society](#). One of the jurors, Jean Fritz, grew up in Edgewater. The Chicago Conspiracy Trial, which followed the confrontations and arrests at the 1968 Democratic National Convention, turned out to be a major challenge to the American justice system. Jean's journals and the vast trove of associated materials she kept, illustrate the lasting effect of the trial on her and her family. The Edgewater Historical Society, located at the corner of Ashland and Balmoral, is open Saturday and Sunday afternoons, 1:00 to 4:00 pm. 



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