

The Peggy Browning Fund Newsletter

Educating Law Students on the Rights and Needs of Workers

Summer 2005

Joseph Lurie, President

Mary Anne Moffa, Executive Director

From Laborer to Lawyer

By Leon Pasker, 1998 Peggy Browning Fellow; Attorney, U.S. Department of Labor, Office of the Solicitor, Region III



Photo by MAM

The following remarks were delivered by Leon Pasker at our Seventh Annual Dinner Dance in Philadelphia in March, 2005.

My name is Leon Pasker. I'm here to talk to you about my experience as a Peggy Browning Fellow and how the experience affected my career as a lawyer advocating for and helping to protect the welfare of wage earners in Pennsylvania and other parts of the U.S.

Let me start by giving you a brief background. I was born and more or less raised here in the Philadelphia/South Jersey area. I began my working career when I was 14 years old. My uncle, who had followed his father into the "waste disposal" business, invested some money along with a couple of other fellows into a couple of restaurants scattered around the Philadelphia area. It was the late seventies, I was in high school, and I would work every day from 6 p.m. (or earlier if I didn't have football or wrestling practice) until midnight as a dishwasher and prep cook at those restaurants. I even left high school for several months to work double shifts in the beginning. I was paid \$2.50/hour. My benefits were that I got to sleep in my mother's house, I was clothed, and I got to eat for free. That was the best part.

Several years later, after the restaurants went bankrupt, I received a couple of scholarships and went to college, but after three semesters, I was asked to leave. I returned to the restaurant business full-time. Eventually I worked my way to an executive chef position, at 25 years old, at a restaurant in New Hope, PA. I was a manager, with full control over hiring and purchasing, among other things.

Those years in the restaurant business really formed my ideas about working for a living. Long, hard hours. Health benefits sometimes for me, rarely for my employees. Decent wages, but no real security. Sick days? Forget about it – no such thing.

Around the age of 28 or so, I realized that the restaurant business was killing me, and the only way I could make easy

money was to own one. So I went back to school to get business and accounting degrees. While I was in school, I thought a law degree would complement my business and accounting degrees perfectly. I could be a restaurant/hotel consultant. Bring your ideas and money to me and I would set up your dream business. And that's where I was headed.

But something happened. While in business school I noticed a trend. I formed an idea that human capital is the most important variable in the capitalist equation. That without people, our rich, vibrant economy would not exist. Consistently, my studies taught me that the most efficient, profitable and long-lasting businesses were those businesses that treated their human capital best. Businesses that provided living wages, benefits and sufficient time away from work to develop the individual produced the most efficient, competitive, healthy and reliable workforce.

Then law school at Temple University arrived, and midway through my second semester, I was diagnosed with Hodgkin's disease. I spent the next ten months in treatment – chemotherapy and surgery. I had to drop down to part-time for a semester, but I managed to get through, graduate on time and survive with the help of many caring people.

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Photo by MAM

Randi Weingarten, President of the United Federation of Teachers, receives award from Joe Lurie, President of The Peggy Browning Fund. See inside for more photos.

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1818 Market Street • Suite 2300 • Philadelphia, PA 19103 • www.peggybrowningfund.org • fax 215-564-2262 • tel 215-665-6815

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I clerked for a federal judge during that first summer of law school, and I saw several employment discrimination cases brought to trial. I felt a real tug towards employment and labor law. Not the most lucrative area in which to practice, but one with real meaning. I often stopped by the Career Development Office at Temple to talk about it with Karen Forman (Director of the Public Interest Law Program) and to develop a plan to put my legal career on that path. Karen must have seen something in me, because she told me I would be perfect for the Peggy Browning Fellowship, a new fund that was offering summer fellowships for law students. I applied and, as luck would have it, I was one of the first ten recipients.

I was given \$3,000 to work the summer at the Philadelphia Unemployment Project, where I met several amazingly dedicated people. And let me tell you how important that money was. I was recovering from cancer and treatment, I was in law school summer classes, and I was borrowing every penny I could to support myself and my wife. That fellowship money allowed me to focus on my work at PUP.

There, primarily, I represented unemployment compensation claimants at referee hearings. It was a tremendous experience. I had seven hearings that summer,

and I remember every one of them. Every one of those claimants needed that unemployment money. All of them should have received the money, but every one of their employers contested. That's why I was there, to help them get what they were entitled to and had worked hard for. We won a couple and I lost a few. But I was hooked. Labor and employment law, on behalf of workers, was for me.

The rest, as they say, is history. I now represent the Secretary of Labor of the United States. My job, in most instances, is to prosecute in civil courts, at the federal level, employers who endanger the health of their employees, or don't pay them properly, or misuse pension money earned by the employees.

Without the Peggy Browning Fund, I may have gone to a big private firm and stuck to my original idea of being a consultant. Or maybe I would have tried to stick with labor and employment law, I don't know. I do know that *the PBF Fellowship allowed me to do work I would never have been able to do at the time, and that opportunity profoundly affected my perception of the role of an attorney as an advocate and counselor.*

I am grateful to have had the opportunity to tell you about my experience. I hope you understand how important the Peggy Browning Fellowship was to me. Thank you very much.

What Peggy Browning Fellowships Mean to Mentor Organizations

Excerpts from remarks made by Craig Rosenbaum, General Counsel of the Chicago Newspaper Guild, at a PBF reception in Chicago in 2003.

The Peggy Browning Fund teaches law school students what labor relations are all about. It exposes law students to the practical realities of being a labor advocate. And what does it mean to Mentor Organizations such as the Chicago Newspaper Guild?

Well, I have to say our Local is probably unique, because we're very small. Most organizations have a lot of people; we have three – an Executive Director, an Attorney, and a part-time Office Manager – and then there's the Peggy Browning Fellow. So we often have to throw the Peggy Browning Fellow right into the heat, and pretty much every time they respond very positively, whether through their research, their writing a memo or a brief, or speaking with our members about legal issues.

Our interns are so bright and so energetic that they have had a positive impact on our members in many ways. In

fact, I deliberately schedule the bulk of my caseload in the summer because I know I'll have the Peggy Browning Fellow to help us out.

It's a very painstaking process to pick a Peggy Browning Fund Fellow. Each year we get 40 or 50 resumes from the top law schools all over the United States, though we only have one position to fill. We seem to find the best and the brightest every time, and they make a real difference for our workers.

These eager, committed students have assisted us in an organizing drive, researched complex legal issues, and helped formulate the foundations of what came out to be successful legal theories. They have made a difference to our members, and I'm also sure our members have made an impact on them in return.

We are very grateful to The Peggy Browning Fund and to all those whose support makes its programs possible.

2005 PBF Honorees

The Peggy Browning Fund honors the men and women who have devoted themselves to improving the lives of working people. Their accomplishments have inspired countless others to advocate for workers' rights. They serve as beacons to the next generation of public interest labor lawyers. In recent months, hundreds of supporters joined us to celebrate Peggy's legacy and to honor leading social justice luminaries for their lifetime achievements.

In January, nearly 200 people attended our reception at The Sky Club in New York City honoring labor leader **Randi Weingarten** (President, United Federation of Teachers) and respected attorney **Eugene G. Eisner** (Senior Partner, Eisner & Associates).



Both Gene Eisner and Randi Weingarten were graduates of the Cornell School of Industrial and Labor Relations. Cornell ILR Director Esta Bigler (center) presents them with a citation from the school.



The Honorable Gale A. Brewer presents Gene with a citation from New York City Council.



Joe Lurie, Jimmy Williams, and IUPAT D.C. 21 Business Manager Jerry Volpe.

In March, honoree **James A. Williams** (General President of the International Union of Painters and Allied Trades) led the way to our most successful event ever, as several hundred people attended our seventh annual Dinner Dance in Philadelphia.



Pennsylvania State Treasurer Bob Casey congratulates honoree Jimmy Williams.



PBF Alumni Lance Geren and Marty Milz.



Former NLRB Members Marshall Babson and Sarah Fox, former NLRB General Counsel Fred Feinstein, and current NLRB Member Wilma Liebman.



Louise Bredhoff, Vicki Bor, and Nancy Bredhoff, longtime supporters of the Fund.

In May, a lively group of supporters honored renowned Washington labor lawyer **Laurence J. Cohen** (Partner, Sherman, Dunn, Cohen, Leifer and Yellig).



Joe Lurie, honoree Larry Cohen, and PBF Secretary Dennis Walsh.



PBF Advisory Board member George Murphy and 2005 PBF Summer Fellow Burt Johnson.

Photos by MAM

To find out more about these honorees, visit www.peggybrowningfund.org/fund_events.html

The Peggy Browning Fund

1818 Market Street, Suite 2300
Philadelphia, PA 19103-3648
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Gene Eisner, accepting PBF Award.

“... the younger generation is searching for avenues through which to pursue economic and social justice, and flocking to organizations that strive to make America a country that values all its inhabitants and not just the wealthiest few. *The success of The Peggy Browning Fund, the organization we are all here to celebrate and support, is a wonderful example of the enthusiasm of young people looking to use their talents to seek justice for working people.* Let us strive to combine the young with those of us who have been toiling in the vineyards lo these many years and are committed to social justice causes to bring labor rights issues to the forefront of the progressive agenda.”

*Gene Eisner, PBF Honoree
New York City, January 26, 2005*

Upcoming Events – Mark Your Calendars

Watch our website for details.

October 2005 – Wrap-Up Workshop for 2005 PBF Fellows and Mentors in Silver Spring, MD.

October 2005 – Seventh Annual National Law Students’ Workers’ Rights Conference in Silver Spring, MD.

November 2005 – Reception in Chicago, IL honoring esteemed attorney **Gilbert A. Cornfield** (Cornfield and Feldman) and noted labor leader **Thomas Balanoff** (President, SEIU Illinois Council and SEIU Local 1).