

Local attorney spends career changing lives

7:41 PM, Aug 31, 2012 | [comments](#)

Written by [Amanda Barren](#)

FILED UNDER

[Morning Show](#)
[Channel 3 News at 7](#)

CLEVELAND -- Ask Joe Messiner what the best part of his career was, and you will find his comical answer, is very serious.

"It's the clients, stupid."

The clients have brought him to work each and every day for the last 45 years at The Legal Aid Society of Cleveland. His career was highlighted by colleagues on Tuesday evening because he is retiring, or as he calls it, "transitioning."

He plans to open a legal office in an Asian Community on Cleveland's West Side.

"I am 70 years old, I am getting ready to start my second 70 and my dad lived to 102 and I hope if i get anywhere near him, God will have been good."

Meissner is a graduate of St. Ignatius, Xavier University and Harvard Law School. At 70-years-old he still engages in legal battles with his clients as if he just started

his job.

"They always fight, and that is good. Sometimes attorney's have a tendency to relax and lay back and you can't do that with our clients."

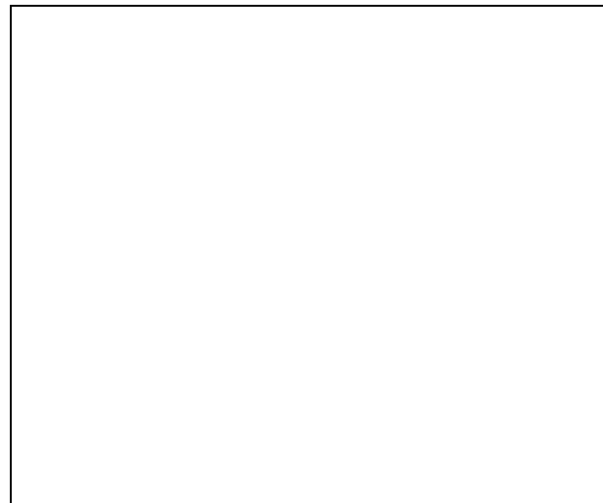
His clients are people who can't afford legal representation on their own and they face dire situations, like the 300 families facing foreclosure that he's assisted, many he's helped keep in their homes.

The countless Northeast Ohioans who were faced with shut-off notices from utility companies in the dead of a Cleveland winter.

Some of the work he's done, of which he is most proud, is with the "Percentage of Income Payment Program," or "PIP."

"It's not a giveaway program, under PIP you have to pay a percent of your income so the more income you have the higher the percent you will be paying but if you pay that, you can then keep on your lights and

Advertisement



Print Powered By FormatDynamics™

gas," last year PIP helped 397,000 families in northeast Ohio.

He wants to apply the same program to families who are facing foreclosure. Some of Meissners legal battles have played out in very public arenas.

He represented the Cleveland American Indian Center in it's fight against the Chief Wahoo emblem. He did civil rights work in Alabama during the 1964 Freedom Summer and created and served as the editor of "The Harvard Civil Rights- Civil Liberties Law Review."

Meissner says getting out of bed each day excited about work, and life is Vietnamese Coffee. He calls it "the best coffee in the world."

"We go to Vietnam every year, we've been back about 25 times in the last 15 years, we are scheduled to go again in September."

Those humanitarian trips follow a distinguished service of Special Forces in the Army during the Vietnam War. The first time he made the trip back he admits concern for how he'd be received.

Over the years he's helped thousands of Vietnamese and Indochinese refugees make homes in Cleveland. Even though he is an inspiration to many who practice law he draws inspiration from another attorney, Mahatma Ghandi.

"He is somebody I hope people would think about when they think about us lawyers,"

Messiner said, "Ghandi for over 20 years practiced as a lawyer in south africa fighting apartheid and representing community groups. Then he went back to India and continued his work there."

Though he is trading one office for another his heart is still very much with Legal Aid. The organization, which gets funding from interest earned from attorney's trusts, congressional funds, and other philanthropic efforts is facing uncertain times. Record-low interest rates, a cut in the congressional appropriation mean layoffs could be in the organizations future.

"All of us have to rally to understand legal aid must be preserved." According to a spokesperson for Legal Aid there is a \$40 million dollar impact felt in Northeast Ohio because of the work the group does.

But for Messiner it's about the impact being made on individuals. "We are told that we are judged by what did we do when we saw other people hungry, what did we do when we saw other people thirsty, what did

Advertisement



Print Powered By  FormatDynamics™

we do when we saw people in jails and without homes?"

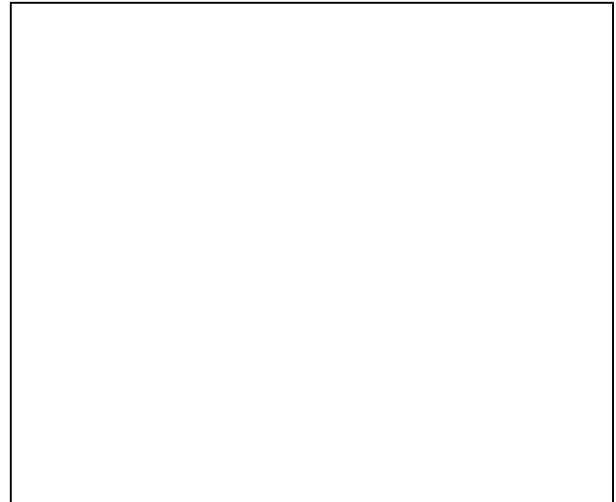
"Life is very short. That is one big lesson I've learned life goes very quickly, you can find you are there at your own wake, not able to talk to much, but you are going to be there at your own wake before you know it you really want to make sure you've piled up a little treasure in heaven."

He laughs, "Each of us are going to be on a trial and i really feel like I am getting closer to my trial so I am looking for a good lawyer to help me."

Lucky for Messiner's 15,000 clients, they found him.

WKYC-TV

Advertisement



Print Powered By  **FormatDynamics™**