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Opinion

## Defense lawyers: Bar none

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In this day of definite budget cuts probably affecting the die-hard, tax-paid Public Defenders Office and the non-profit Legal Aid Society staff in Lake, Geauga or Cuyahoga counties, who will defend the monetarily defenseless in court?

This is even as public defenders face little money and an "assembly line" of plea bargain cases, and no chance of fair trials, says the National Legal Aid and Defender Association.

So the Lake County Public Defender's Office and its counterparts could wind up working three times harder with less staff in these economic bad times.

Consider attorneys **Steve LaTourette** and **John Trebets**.

Republican LaTourette is now better known as the tough former Lake County prosecutor who became a congressman. Democrat Trebets is best known as the Mentor Muny Court judge.

But in their longer-haired days, LaTourette and Trebets were once poorly paid public defenders.

They were oft seen in the Courthouse hallway waiting for a judge to assign them to the case of a penniless defendant just indicted by a grand jury.

Justice for all.

That's still the goal of Lake County Chief Public Defender **Paul LaPlante**.

LaPlante was also once a crime-busting longtime assistant county prosecutor. He now works closely with Chief Assistant Public Defender **Charles Grieshammer** oft in the news.

It's also now many a would-be self-trained jailhouse lawyer.

You know, he bides his time by winding up in a court in one seat as the appealing defendant and in the same I-the-jury chair as his own defense attorney.

Most self-hired jailhouse lawyers don't get beyond the prison cell door. A few, though, made appeal after appeal in higher and higher court, then won freedom. So it's now always a non-lawyer who presents himself as a fool for a client.

And what's another thing shared in common nowadays by public defenders, jailhouse lawyers and pro bono defense

attorneys?

Annually nowadays and often without being paid, such lawyers and special interest justice groups like Legal Aid have used DNA tests to get hundreds of wrongly convicted and falsely identified prison inmates freed and exonerated after maybe after decades behind bars.

But it's not only that conclave. It's also some relentless private attorneys.

In Lake County, consider private attorneys **Albert L. "Al" Purola** and **Leo J. Talikka**.

For years, Purola, even after unsuccessfully seeking a judicial bench or two, has showed up in a courtroom the day of indictment to file challenge or to appeal the same minute.

After quietly serving in such roles as Lake Metroparks law director, Talikka semi-retired and returned to his non-stop role of years ago as a fiery defense attorney, whether in the low-profile misdemeanor case or headliner of a felony case.

Purola and Talikka are a little reminiscent of the two former but long-running TV series: "Perry Mason" (**Raymond Burr**) and "(Ben) Matlock" (**Andy Griffith**).

The guys aren't to be confused with the girls like former law partners **Karen Lawson** and **Sandra Dray**, the **Calista Flockhart** actresses of the TV court-case series, "Ally McBeal."

For little pay, Lawson and Dray took on jobs such as special prosecutors under former prosecutor LaTourette in the nationally publicized case of the murdered father, mother and three children in Kirtland.

But Lawson (who's now the Lake County Juvenile Court judge-elect) and Dray served both as the voice and heart of the defenseless victims and as the prosecutors of the convicted assailants. Both Lawson and Dray also defended many a homeless child as guardian ad litem.

Besides all above, there are notable private attorneys who serve for free or little money, and often with a little controversy.

That's such as Lake County's **Laura DePledge**, **Randy Klammer** and **John Luskin**, Geauga County's **Susan Petersen** and **Paul Newman**, or Cuyahoga County's **Avery Friedman** and **Angelo Lonardo** (now a judge's lawyer in a current case).

LaTourette and Trebets, LaPlante and Grieshammer, Purola and Talikka, Lawson and Dray, etc, etc, live by two laws.

One such law is the U.S. Constitution's 6th Amendment "right to counsel" for all.

The other is the 1963 Gideon v. Wainwright decision of the U.S. Supreme Court ruling that defendants are entitled to government-paid representation in court.

Before the 1963 Gideon law, America knew many a famous self-appointed pro bono defense attorney, many of whom never attended or even graduated from law school and taught themselves.

Think **Abe Lincoln**, **Patrick Henry**, **John Marshall** or **Clarence Darrow**.

Amid all this in current times, the National Defender Association writes: "The problem of excessive case loads and low salaries still plague many public defenders' offices."

Meanwhile, this is a loooooong discourse on one theme. As one of my defense attorney buddies once told me after reciting a

law:

"You have the right to remain silent. Please use it."

*David W. Jones' columns run Wednesdays and Sundays.*

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