Foundation News

Michigan State Bar Foundation

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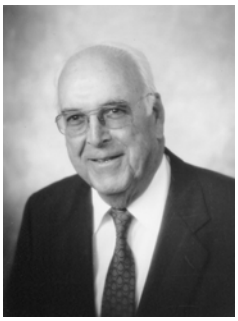

John W. Cummiskey

John W. Cummiskey Posthumously Receives Foundation's Highest Honor

The Michigan State Bar Foundation has selected John W. Cummiskey (posthumously) as the 2010 recipient of the Founders Award. Chief Justice Marilyn Kelly will present the award to Mr. Cummiskey's family on behalf of the Foundation at the September 29th Awards Banquet during the State Bar's Annual Meeting in Grand Rapids. Past recipients included Dennis Archer, Wallace Riley, Charles Rutherford, Judge Julian Cook, Patrick Bruetsch, Kim Cahill (posthumously) and Judge Avern Cohn.

Judge Al Butzbaugh, former State Bar President and current Vice President of the Foundation, said "Though John passed away in 2002, the Foundation could not have this high award without John receiving it." Foundation President Margaret Nichols said "John's contributions to access to justice were extraordinary. Today, in continuing our work on access to justice, we still ask 'What would John do?'" Mr. Cummiskey spent his 80th birthday at a State Bar Access to Justice Task Force meeting exhorting his colleagues to work until they were 80 to make justice available to everyone, offering his now much-cited quote "Access to Justice is a dream. We must make it a reality." "We continue to accept that challenge from John in honoring his legacy with this Founders Award," said Foundation Executive Director, Linda Rexer.

Mr. Cummiskey was a Foundation Trustee and long-time chair of the Foundation's Legal Services Grants Committee. A former chair of the American Bar Association's Standing Committee on Legal Aid and Indigent Defense, he was a strong voice in national, state and local efforts to provide civil legal aid for the poor. In 1948, he helped set up legal aid organizations across Michigan. In 1965 he worked with future U.S. Supreme Court Justice Lewis Powell and Sargent Shriver to secure civil legal aid federal funding, which continues to this day. In his honor, in 1982 the State Bar created the John W. Cummiskey Pro Bono Award given annually to a Michigan lawyer for exemplary pro bono service. He was a founding member of the State Bar's Access to Justice Task Force in 1996 and, together with the Foundation and legal aid programs, began the Access to Justice Campaign in 1997 to raise funds for legal aid. He helped develop the state's first court-based legal self-help center, the Legal Assistance Center in Grand Rapids, which was dedicated in his honor in 2002.

Mr. Cummiskey graduated from the University of Michigan with a BA in 1938 and a JD with distinction in 1941. He served in the U.S. army from 1941-1945, achieving the rank of Major. He was the youngest-ever President of the State Bar of Michigan in 1956-57 and received the State Bar's highest honor, the Roberts P. Hudson Award in 1991. He served on the American Bar Association Board of Governors and was a Fellow both of the American Bar Foundation and the Michigan State Bar Foundation. He was a member of the Kent County Aeronautics Board and trustee of Aquinas College, among many other community roles. He was a founding member of the Grand Rapids law firm of Miller, Johnson, Snell and Cummiskey ("Miller Johnson") and was known widely as a skilled employment law and labor relations lawyer. His Miller Johnson colleague Jon Muth has said "Even in his later years, John was still a visionary. He never looked back…he was brimming with ideas and plans for their realization."

The Michigan State Bar Foundation provides leadership and grants to improve access for all to the justice system, including support for civil legal aid to the poor, law-related education, and conflict resolution. For more information, visit www.msbf.org.