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LIFETIME ACHIEVERS

Our 12th annual awards honor lawyers whose remarkable careers have shaped the legal profession.

LIFETIME ACHIEVERS 2015



MICHAEL CARDOZO | Proskauer Rose

WITH THE SAME LAST NAME AS A U.S. SUPREME COURT JUSTICE, Michael Cardozo was all but destined for a legal career. “Some people thought I was going to be a lawyer from the day I was born,” says Cardozo, 74, a distant cousin of jurist Benjamin Cardozo.

After graduating from Columbia Law School, he began to build on the Cardozo family name, helping to make Proskauer Rose a player in sports law. He was one of a cadre of lawyers who developed the firm’s relationships with major professional sports leagues. Among other matters, Cardozo handled aspects of landmark antitrust litigation in the National Basketball Association’s merger with the American Basketball Association. “He was instrumental in the growth of our practice,” says Proskauer chair Joseph Leccese.

He also distinguished himself as a leader in New York legal associations and as a judicial reform expert. He was president of the New York City Bar Association in the late 1990s, and chaired the Fund for Modern Courts, which focuses on improving the state judiciary.

In January 2002, Cardozo left Proskauer to become New York City corporation counsel, the city’s chief lawyer, managing hundreds of other lawyers, under former Mayor Michael Bloomberg. Cardozo served through 2013, making him the city’s longest-tenured corporation counsel. His tenure started months after the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks and ran through the 2008 financial crisis. He also oversaw litigation related to city gun control efforts and a ban on smoking in public spaces.

One of his toughest calls, he says, came in 2005, before New York state legalized same-sex marriage. The city was sued by a gay couple seeking a marriage license, and Cardozo’s office was called upon to defend the city’s refusal to issue the license. “Bloomberg was a strong pro-



ponent of gay marriage, as was I,” Cardozo says. After a state judge ruled against the city, Cardozo had to decide whether to appeal, challenging a ruling that he agreed with ideologically. “What should I, as the chief lawyer for the city of New York, do?” says Cardozo. “I filed a notice of appeal. I thought that was the right thing to do, because it was not up to Michael Cardozo to decide what the law was.” A state appeals court ruled that New York’s constitution didn’t compel recognition of gay marriage, but that decision was later voided by state legislation.

“He never let politics influence his legal judgment,” Bloomberg says of Cardozo. “New York City is safer and stronger because of his work, and I’m sure he’d agree that his most lasting legacy will be hiring and mentoring so many talented lawyers.” During his tenure, Cardozo cut New York’s settlement and damages payouts by 14 percent and was credited with increasing diversity among the city’s lawyers.

Cardozo returned to Proskauer in 2014. There he still practices law, heads diversity initiatives and helps coordinate the pro bono program. The role gives him a chance to counsel younger lawyers, including about the need to speak truth to power. “The most important thing that a lawyer has is his reputation and integrity,” says Cardozo. “The lawyer who doesn’t have the guts to say, to whomever his important client is, ‘You can’t do it,’ shouldn’t be a lawyer.”

—SCOTT FLAHERTY

Best Advice He Ever Received About the Law:

“There is more to life in a big firm than practicing law and billing 2,500 hours a year. Be it typical pro bono cases or a bar association, you have to look for the opportunity to do something more, where you can make a difference.”