

70 YEARS SEEKING JUSTICE

THIRTY-FIVE YEARS AGO, I had the honor of serving as the 35th President of an organization that led the state in continued legal education and early lobbying against tort reform. The legacy of that organization stands strong today.

The Ohio Association for Justice's history speaks to the soul of the organization. For 70 years, OAJ has sustained a commitment to protect the fundamental rights of injured people.

In 1954, a few Ohio workers' compensation claimants' lawyers formed the "Ohio Chapter of the National Association of Claimants' Counsel". NACC was conceived as an educational platform for members.

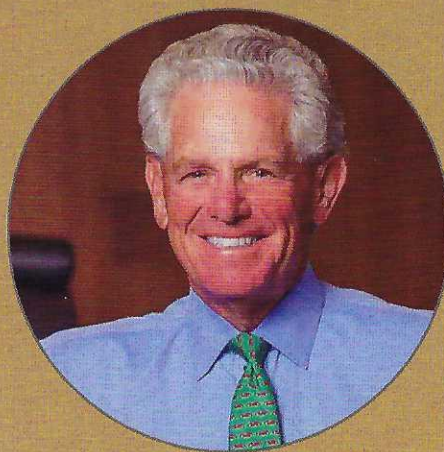
In 1962, Randy Norris of Akron championed reshaping Ohio's NACC chapter into the "Ohio Academy of Trial Lawyers". OATL instantly expanded into an organization that included not only claimants' counsel in BWC cases but also "plaintiff trial lawyers". While claimants' lawyers faced uphill battles for their clients, plaintiff lawyers contended with criticism for advancing civil cases that assailed institutional America and the nation's insurance companies.

Until enactment of the landmark Civil Rights Act of 1964, insurers, corporate titans and governmental leaders might have justifiably felt that they cast dominating shadows in state and federal courthouses. Meanwhile, OATL ascended as an acknowledged national leader for continuing legal education programs. OATL's voluntary CLE seminars became must-attend events for small-firm and solo practitioners.

From the mid-1960s through 2000, attendance at OATL's CLE events had no peer among Ohio's law-related organizations. Gathering for OATL's CLE events, Ohio's plaintiff and claimant's bar embraced bonding with shared professional support that continues today. During this three-decades era, OATL's members assumed a commanding presence as stand-up advocates within Ohio's bar and in their communities.

While OATL's membership rolls grew, OATL leaders Michael Colley, of Columbus, James Pazol, of Youngstown, and John Lancione, of Cleveland, prophetically warned OATL's members to brace for adverse political momentum. In 1978, they orchestrated the hiring of Gene King as OATL's full-time Executive Director. King had earned respect as a lobbyist who expertly dealt with complex legislative issues.

By the 1980s, Ohio had become a political and socio-economic battleground, percolating for collision with the expanded influence of plaintiff and claimants' lawyers.



Frank A. Ray
OAJ Fellow
President 1989 - 90

In 1985, high-profile lobbyists engaged by the insurance and manufacturing industries trumpeted the words "tort reform" in the halls of the Ohio Statehouse.

The fledgling American Tort Reform Association set up shop in Columbus. Ohio's "Political Subdivision Tort Liability Act" was swiftly enacted by the General Assembly.

The act broadly repealed judicial precedents that eroded tort immunity for cities, townships and counties. Propelled by this anti-plaintiff lawyer statutory enactment, legislative floodgates opened for tort reform in Ohio.

In 1985, OATL President John "Jack" Liber, of Cleveland, and his board acted decisively and dramatically to expand OATL's performance of its mission.

JACK ASKED, "IF NOT US, WHO?"

In 1986, OATL's *pro bono* lobbying by its members deflected onerous legislative tort reform.

In 1990, the Ohio Supreme Court ordered mandatory CLE; and CLE providers proliferated. Formerly operating as the state's preeminent CLE provider, OATL necessarily evolved to assume its undeniable leadership role in Ohio's political landscape.

In 2007, the organization's name changed from OATL to the Ohio Association for Justice, but for 70 years and counting, the organization's soul remains unchanged - protection of injured people's rights.