

# Firm Honors Founder

By Sandra Parker

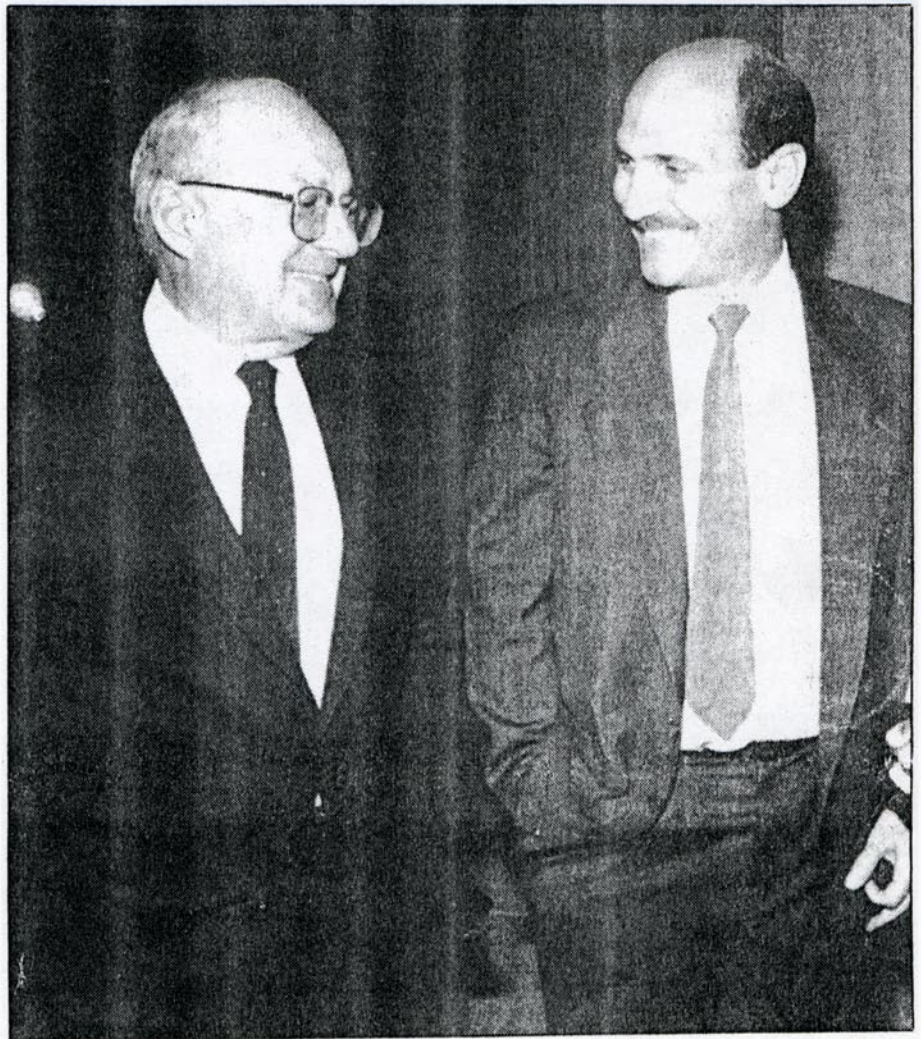
*Daily Journal Staff Reporter*

Frederick M. Nicholas, founder of Public Counsel, was named the first recipient of the public interest law firm's newly created Founder's Award.

"It is difficult for me to comprehend that the embryo law firm, which I helped conceive and develop 20 years ago, is now the largest pro bono law firm in the United States — it's inconceivable," Nicholas said.

Public Counsel now has nine full-time lawyers, 26 staff members and a \$1 million budget, said Steven A. Nissen, executive director. The firm was initially supported solely by the Beverly Hills Bar Association. Now, it also is supported by the Los Angeles County Bar Association.

Nicholas was honored at Public Counsel's annual William O. Douglas Award Dinner March 22 at the Beverly Hilton Hotel.



ROBERT LEVINS / The Daily Journal

**FOUNDER'S AWARD** — *Frederick M. Nicholas, Public Counsel Founder's Award recipient, left, and Steven A. Nissen, executive director of Public Counsel, chat at the William O. Douglas Award Dinner.*

## Contributions Praised

In presenting the award, State Bar President Alan I. Rothenberg praised Nicholas' dedication to providing low-cost legal services and his contributions to other community organizations. Nicholas is the chair of the Museum of Contemporary Art, vice-president of the American Civil Liberties Foundation, a trustee of Pitzer College and chair of the Music Center's Disney Hall expansion.

"If the rest of us in this room could in our lifetimes accomplish a mere fraction of what Fred has accomplished and give back to our community a fraction of what he has accomplished, in the aggregate this would be the best community on the face of the earth," Rothenberg said.

Public Counsel President Rex Heinke presented the William O. Douglas award

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to Fred Friendly, noting Friendly's 50-year commitment to broadcasting and law. Friendly created the acclaimed PBS series, "The Constitution: That Delicate Balance."

"But I think the thing he's done that will appeal to lawyers the most is he made the Socratic method respectable — and even got people to like it," Heinke said.

Friendly is a former president of CBS News and is now professor emeritus of broadcast journalism at Columbia University.

Friendly said he fears a "nervous breakdown" of the First Amendment. He decried the fact that news has become a profit-making venture for the networks. This has led to unethical behavior among news organizations, he said, citing the docudrama form as an example. "It's not a documentary — it's make-believe, it's lying," he said. "It's a sin against truth, it's a sin against the First Amendment."

### Pro Bono Award

Morrison & Foerster received the pro bono firm award for its donation of 62,000 hours of attorney time — an average of 127 hours per lawyer — amounting to nearly \$9 million in value, said Kathryn A. Ballsun, president of the Beverly Hills Bar Association. Ballsun

said the firm is "a leader in providing legal assistance in the areas of children's rights, child care and children in poverty."

She recounted the story of one case handled by three of the firm's attorneys, who represented a Guatemalan woman.

The woman had walked from Guatemala and entered the United States illegally. She gave birth to a child in a Los Angeles hospital and within hours of the birth she was pressured by an adoption agency into giving up her child.

The next day she tried to regain her child but the agency refused her pleas. But three Morrison & Foerster attorneys filed a writ on her behalf, arguing: "If you have three days to rescind your purchase of a refrigerator, is it right for the law to deny even one day to reconsider giving up your child for adoption?" Ballsun said, adding "How could they lose?"

Barbara Reeves, chair of the firm's Los Angeles pro bono committee, said advocating children's interests has special rewards.

"Every time you help a child, that child is hopefully going to grow up into a better adult and that will be the strength of the next generation in Los Angeles," Reeves said. "Helping children not only makes a profound difference in their lives, but it's a lot of fun. As a litigator, I can't tell you how nice it is to have a client throw his arms around my neck and say, 'I can't wait to see you again.'"

Public Counsel's award to an individual went to Stephanie Sautner, head of the Los Angeles City Attorney's Slum Housing Task Force. The task force has a 100 percent conviction rate, said Harry L. Hathaway, president of the Los Angeles County Bar Association and a past president of Public Counsel.

"Individual lawyers at work in pro bono matters is the lifeblood of Public Counsel," Hathaway said. "Stephanie's energy and creativity have made every landlord in Los Angeles stand up and pay attention. Through her courageous efforts, she has given the poor true belief in the slum tenant's most important right of all — the right to live in a decent, habitable and safe dwelling."

Sautner, a former New York City police officer and undercover detective, graduated from Whittier College of Law despite the fact she never earned a bach-

elor's degree. She joined the Los Angeles City Attorney's office in 1984 and became head of the Slum Housing Task Force the following year.

In accepting the award, Sautner began with a "confession."

"When I began my assignment with the city's housing task force, I thought I was walking into a really plum, easy assignment," she said. "Being a recently transplanted New Yorker, I had a serious case of New York attitude. After all, I'd worked in the streets of Harlem, South Bronx and Brooklyn — L.A. was going to be a piece of cake. I didn't believe people in L.A. would know a slum if it fell on them. The buildings here are pink. I was soon taken down a peg."

### Pink Buildings

In her first tour of one of these pink buildings, Sautner said she found much it worse than buildings in New York. She said one family lived in a utility closet, with only an airshaft for ventilation, for which they paid \$240 a month. She saw babies with rat bites, open elevator shafts, wild dogs roaming hallways, and landlord repairs limited to placing masking tape over holes in walls.

"I soon learned that the pastel exteriors of the L.A. buildings masked horrors most of us have only read about in Dickens novels," Sautner said.

With the help of Public Counsel, Sautner said she and her staff were able to win large damage awards from slumlords and force them to bring more than 1,200 units up to municipal building and safety codes.

She thanked Public Counsel for the award and "for recognizing that prosecutors can be public interest lawyers too."

The \$300-per-plate dinner raised more than \$300,000 for Public Counsel, Nissen reported. With \$500,000 in pledges so far, he said the firm needs to raise \$4.5 million for a permanent home for the firm.

"The highest calling of our profession is to ameliorate human suffering and not to ignore it," Nissen said. "While events [in Eastern Europe] have occurred on the international stage in full view of all of us, similar human rights episodes are played out in our own backyard in thousands of individual cases each year involving political asylum applicants who fear persecution if they return to their homelands."