

Chicago Daily Law Bulletin

Volume 149, No. 244

Monday, December 15, 2003

Amicus Curious



Paul McGrath

Harold A. Katz (left) and Irving M. Friedman are celebrating 50 years as partners in a firm concentrating in labor law. On Friday, colleagues and partners in the firm threw a party in their honor.

'Champions of labor' mark a milestone

By BILL MYERS
Law Bulletin staff writer

After 50 years in business during which they took on more than 40,000 workers' compensation claims and racked up uncounted hours in local, state and federal litigation, Irving M. Friedman and Harold A. Katz took a breather Friday night.

"We've had a fun and exciting — and enjoyable — law practice for more than half a century," Katz said.

The two men were founding partners in the labor law boutique now known as Katz, Friedman, Eagle, Eisenstein & Johnson P.C. Their colleagues and partners in the firm, which is celebrating its 50th year, threw a party for the duo Friday night at the Metropolitan Club in the Sears Tower.

Although they knew the party had been planned, neither of them knew it was in their honor.

"At my age, you're not supposed to be surprised, but I was," said Katz, 82.

The two men say they were not just figures in labor history, but figures of labor history: Over the course of five decades, they have fought to wrest control of the Congress of Industrial Organizations from left wing-dominated unions, to unionize farm-machine workers throughout Illinois, to end workplace discrimination against pregnant women, to get automakers to take responsibility for dangerous products and to desegregate union halls in the South.

If nothing else, there has never been a dull moment, both men said.

"I think representing unions is very constructive type of work. Collective bargaining is basically a creative operation and representing unions in different contexts is very constantly stimulating," Friedman said.

One of the civil rights cases brought them to

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Memphis, where they fought to keep the UAW local from building a segregated hall.

His brow furrowed and his lips pressed together in a tight smile, Friedman, 85, said the people in Memphis were “very courteous” and greeted the out-of-town lawyers with “true Southern hospitality.”

“But they backed down,” Friedman said.

Their firm was also involved in years of litigation surrounding the Caterpillar strike in downstate Decatur.

Hearing Friedman speak about the Caterpillar strike, Katz nodded and broke in, tapping his partner on the knee and smiling broadly.

“There was more litigation growing out of that labor dispute, I am absolutely certain, than any that has ever happened in the United States since 1935, when the modern labor movement began,” Katz said, his eyes flashing.

When Katz and Friedman met, it was as opposing counsel: Katz was representing the United Auto Workers’ union before the National Labor Relations Board, for whom Friedman was then a senior attorney representing a worker in a claim against both his employer and the union.

“It was a several-day trial and we got to know each other very well. We even got to respect each other,” Friedman said.

Katz said he watched Friedman in court and said, “Now that’s a great lawyer.”

“And after the trial was over, I invited him to join my law firm,” Katz continued. “I figured, ‘That guy is a perfect partner for me.’ It was the smartest thing I ever did.”

Both men say they were drawn to labor law practically from birth. Katz was born in Shelbyville, Tenn., and grew up in Nashville. As a liberal in the Jim Crow South, Katz said he felt a natural affinity for organized labor.

“I was always interested in labor. I was progressive by nature,” he said.

When he attended Vanderbilt University in the late 1930s and early 1940s, Katz tried to integrate the Southern university and his relationship with unions grew even closer.

“The only allies I had were the labor people down there,” he said.

Katz came to Chicago to attend law school at

the University of Chicago Law School, from which he obtained a juris doctorate in 1948.

Katz and his wife, Ethel Mae, have been married for 58 years and live in Glencoe, a North Shore suburb.

Friedman grew up in Brooklyn, New York, “during a time of great labor upheaval — strikes were an everyday occurrence” and labor advocacy was something into which he was raised.

“I came from a working man’s family,” he said.

Friedman graduated from City College of New York in 1938 and after five years in the Army went on to New York University Law School, getting a degree in 1947.

Friedman and his wife, Abigail, have been married for 57 years — “a relatively short time,” he said — and live in the Hyde Park neighborhood, on the South Side.

Although he is hard pressed to come up with his proudest moment as an advocate, Friedman said a case early in his career, *Acme Industrial v. UAW*, 385 U.S. 432 (1967), established the precedence of full disclosure for both sides in a labor dispute.

“It’s far more important than it sounds because it was a way of doing business,” Friedman said. “It’s kind of a threshold case.”

Katz, for whom a stint as an Illinois representative between 1965 and 1982 “was a very exciting period in my life,” said his proudest achievement was a 1956 article in the *Harvard Law Review* in which he proposed “the Crashworthiness Doctrine,” in which automakers should be held liable for the injuries and deaths caused by vehicle design.

“It began the whole phase of safe automobiles in the United States. I mean, prior to that ... nobody paid any attention to safety,” he said.

Both men added, however, that their 50 years of day-in, day-out work in the service of labor would be achievement enough.

“We don’t represent corporations, we represent working people and individuals,” Katz said. “It’s been a very rewarding experience to represent the people who otherwise don’t have legal representation.”