

ASA's 2018 Hall of Fame Award winner is a tireless legal advocate for older adults



Photo: Robert Bailey

Paul Nathanson

The winner of the 2018 ASA Hall of Fame Award is Paul Nathanson. This award is given to an individual age 65 or older who has, through lifetime advocacy and leadership, enhanced the lives of older adults through demonstrated leadership at the national level.

Paul Nathanson's longtime interest in aging and his passion for doing the right thing grew out of four epiphanies:

When just out of law school, and working at O'Melveny & Myers, a large Los Angeles law firm, Nathanson often found himself focused on the homeless elders outside his office building, pushing around all their worldly possessions. While vacationing in Greece, he met an older couple who had saved up money their whole lives to visit the Acropolis, but when they got to the site, realized they couldn't negotiate the stairs. While working on private pensions in O'Melveny & Myers' tax department, Nathanson realized that many older people were not receiving any pensions at all. And, with grandparents who had been killed in the Holocaust, never could he

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fulfill his "romantic ideal" of sitting on a park bench with his grandparents as they passed down life stories.

A former ASA Board Chair, Nathanson served as executive director of the National Senior Citizens Law Center (NSCLC) (now Justice in Aging) from 1972 to 1980 and 2008 to 2013. He also was a professor of elder law at the University of New Mexico (UNM), directed the University's Institute of Public Law and was an associate provost for UNM Academic Affairs.

Pursuing a Path of Service

While at O'Melveny & Myers, Nathanson tried to interest the senior partners in a pro bono project to help older adults, but it never got off the ground. When he heard that the University of Southern California had received a grant from the Office of Economic Opportunity to fund an elder law center, he applied for a job and was hired as staff attorney. This center eventually became the NSCLC, with offices in Los Angeles, Sacramento and Washington, D.C.

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Nathanson became a liaison, nationally, between legal aid offices that had no resources and the aging services community, which at that point, he says, was not so concerned about elders' legal issues. He had to explain to those in working aging services that although older adults may not ask directly for legal aid, they had plenty of legal needs.

With his background in pensions, Nathanson began his work at NSCLC litigating over pensions and won big settlements under the Taft-Hartley Act. He was proving, he says somewhat wryly, that labor law was "for the benefit of beneficiaries—what a concept!"

The NSCLC "let him go to Congress," where he was instrumental in getting the Older Americans Act amended to mandate funding for legal services under Title III. This began Nathanson's intense involvement in the world of aging. It helped, he says, that the NSCLC had a Board of Directors packed with leaders in aging—Carl Eisdorfer, Elias Cohen, Cyril Brickfield and Hobart Jackson.

When President Nixon passed Supplemental Security Insurance (SSI) in 1972, "we were the first ones traveling from Tallahassee to Seattle" to train attorneys in the subject matter, "because no one knew anything about it." And when SSI was implemented in 1974, Nathanson was at the NSCLC's helm. He's proud of his work "creating the Center [NSCLC], having it do great work, having it be in existence for [more than] 45 years and, in the end, because of different lawsuits over the years, showing that [elders] had some strong advocacy in their corner," he says.

Adventures Out West

After working eight years at the NSCLC, Nathanson's wife at the time wanted to move to New Mexico to practice law, so he called the University of New Mexico law school and found they had just received a grant from the Administration on Aging to launch a legal clinic on rural law. The couple moved to Albuquerque, where Nathanson taught law and aging, directed UNM's Institute of Public Law and was an associate provost for UNM Academic Affairs.

"It was fabulous. I could take my national experience and go to the most rural places, in the mountains, with law students, to provide services in settings very different from the national scene. ... It was a real blessing to be able to translate [my experience] into a rural setting, and make it relevant," says Nathanson.

"This was the next level of gratifica-

tion with the Older Americans Act: Under Title III, it is now funded to the tune more than \$1 billion in the 2018 budget.

Nathanson worked for more than 25 years at UNM and was contemplating retirement in 2007, while also serving on the NSCLC Board. The Center was looking for new direction, he says, so he signed on to help in a temporary capacity, knowing that because the job wasn't permanent, he could more easily bring along and mentor a great candidate, which he found in current Executive Director Kevin Prindiville.

"In the last five years [during Nathanson's tenure], \$1 billion in Social Security and SSI benefits have been returned to over 100,000 recipients because of the NSCLC's leadership, and \$600 million-plus of health services to over 300,000 California seniors," said Prindiville in 2013, upon bestowing Nathanson with the NSCLC's Distinguished Advocacy Award.

Now based in Florida, Nathanson serves on the Board of the Florida Health Justice Project, which improves low-income Floridians' access to affordable healthcare through legal advocacy. "And, I'm still working as counsel for [Justice in Aging] eight hours a week," he says.

"I'm truly honored to receive the ASA Hall of Fame Award," says Nathanson. "It was great to [start] a career when I went to O'Melveny, but I was often on the side of cases I felt politically uncomfortable with. But then to end up with a career where it resonates with history, I feel like

I'm doing something good. We're fighting the same issues, but we've made it. And frankly, and this is important to me, I've had a lot of fun." ■