

# PEOPLE OF ACTION

## Franklyn Gimbel

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Past RCM President, 2000-01

*(Member since 1995)*



*Frank and Annie Gimbel with an old friend.*

The laugh lines are deep, and his eyes are laser-focused on the conversation at hand, Frank Gimbel, a self-described “war-horse,” has been intensely engaged in life since his beginning. Despite the seriousness of his work as a defense attorney, Frank and his wife, Anne, always find time for humor and joy.

Travel and volunteer work help fuel the couple. A memorable cruise a few years ago included stops in Stockholm, Finland, St. Petersburg, Gdansk and Copenhagen. *“This was very comfortable and extremely educational. Annie and I finished the trip with a good sense of life for that part of the world which normally would not have been a*

*vacation destination.”* While traveling the world had always been a family and couple adventure, about five years ago Frank bought a house in Florida and stopped cruising. He felt he wanted to be closer to U.S. health care.

Frank met his wife, Anne, after a golf tournament nearly 40 years ago. (He had golfed with Judge Terry Evans and they went to the Brothers Two restaurant after the tournament. Annie was the hostess there and it was kismet). Annie has gone on to earn a master’s in health education and is also a certified yoga instructor. She has served on the Board of the Milwaukee Art Museum and has done other community work which includes a dedicated interest in the political landscape, but Frank identifies her as the *“artsy part of the family.”*

Reaching out to the community is an important aspect of Frank’s life. *“There is nothing we do that should be measured by a direct economic impact. Giving back is a crucial part of being a good citizen and neighbor,”* he notes. In demonstration of this mantra, Frank has established an impressive record of community service, for example:

- Vice Chairman, Milwaukee Fire and Police Commission, 1977 - 1982
- Chairman, Board of Directors, Wisconsin Center District (Owner/ Operator of Wisconsin Center, UW-Milwaukee Panther Arena, and Miller High Life Theatre), 1994 - 2015
- Director, Greater Milwaukee Foundation Board, 2000 - 2012
- President, Downtown Rotary Club, 2000 – 2001
- Community Service Human Relations Award, Milwaukee Jewish Federation, 2002
- Member, Greater Milwaukee Committee, 2010-2015
- Member, Marquette Law School Advisory Board
- Director, Wisconsin Club Board, 2010-2016

Law is the family business, however. With many family members who were lawyers, early in life Frank cultivated an interest in people. His natural persuasive ability and leadership qualities matched perfectly with a study of the law, earning degrees from the University of Wisconsin and Marquette University Law School. And his children have followed suit. The father of four, three boys and a girl, each of his sons are lawyers and his daughter, Rachel, married fellow Rotarian Benjamin Wagner a shareholder at Habush Habush & Rottier. (Several years ago, son, Josh, was asked by the partners to join Frank at Gimbel, Reilly, Guerin & Brown, LLP, Law Offices).

Frank and Anne have seven grandchildren, all too young, yet, to determine their career paths.

This legendary criminal defense attorney has represented some very colorful people including the late Sally Papia a famous purported “mob” connected restaurateur. But Frank didn’t start his career as a defense attorney, in fact, from 1963 through 1968 he served as an Assistant United States Attorney.

He was on front lines during the heat of the then decades long US Civil Rights Movement which historians mark as lasting from 1955 through 1968. (Historians mark the Civil Rights movement beginning 12/1/55 the day Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat on a Montgomery, AL bus, through April 11, 1968 days after the assassination of The Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and the signing of the Federal Fair Housing Act). Frank was a federal prosecutor in 1964 when the Voting Rights Act was signed; and he witnessed “Bloody Sunday,” in Selma, AL in 1965 and the signing of the Civil Rights Act of 1967, as well.



*Frank & Annie Gimbel with the Wagner Grandkids. (The children's father, Benjamin Wagner is also a Rotarian and married to Frank & Annie's daughter, Rachel).*

Since the Reconstruction era in 1865 after the Civil War, the struggle for equal rights has been a fact of American life. In the wake of the murder of George Floyd by a former Minneapolis police officer, Frank believes the struggle still doesn’t have a clear path of when equal rights will, in fact, be a reality for all Americans.

*“I think what is happening now has happened time and time again in our lifetimes, but now there is often incontrovertible proof when there is an unacceptable use of force by law enforcement officers. Cellphones have made ‘live’ videos available when police have used either poor judgement, or a disregard for human life. I am not anti-police, I come from a background of representing the Police Union, the Sheriff’s Union, Former Police Chief Ed Flynn and current Chief Morales. I have been an instructor of Police Science at the Police Academy.’*

*‘I do think, however, we are experiencing a different climate now than in the 1960s, inasmuch as the movement leaders are tireless in their pursuits. They are tireless in their goal of creating a visible presence in the face of legislators and policy makers. They are not giving up. Protestors are inspired to go another day and another day by reason of the policy makers reactions. People in positions of power to change can’t hide behind a tree; now there is clear exposure of racist and bad behavior. And when there is proof beyond a reasonable doubt of a violation, that person should be punished to the full extent of the law.’*

*‘If you think about it, the South really won the Civil War. While slavery was condemned, minorities continue to be disenfranchised and abused in many areas of the South right now, today.’”*

A turning point for Frank's own trajectory was as interesting as the man himself. A young attorney, married with two little kids, Frank was barely making a living in 1963 when Patrick Lucey was State Chair of the Democratic party (later elected Governor of WI). Lucey asked Frank to Chair the Jefferson Jackson Dinner and be the emcee. Frank said he was struggling to make a living as a lawyer at the time BUT if Lucey could get him a job as an Assistant US Attorney Frank would chair the event. While at lunch at the Schroeder Hotel Lucey asked the host to bring him a phone (at the time cellphones hadn't been born). Lucey called US Attorney General Robert (Bobby) Kennedy while Frank was seated beside him and got Frank the US Attorney job.

He then went onto chair the event and while the program was in progress the Secret Service advised Frank that the keynote speaker Vice President Lyndon Johnson would be 30 minutes late. Frank scrambled to fill the 30-minute void and the evening was a huge success.

Frank says working as a US attorney changed his life. *"I learned how to be a lawyer; most of the skills I have, I learned from that job."*

And a successful lawyer he is, for example:

- Lifetime Achievement Award, Milwaukee Bar Association
- Life Fellow, American Bar Foundation
- Marquette University Lifetime Achievement Award, 2015
- Fellow, American College of Trial Lawyers
- Fellow, Wisconsin Law Foundation
- United States Attorney General Superior Performance Award, 1967
- Wisconsin Association of Criminal Defense Lawyers Leadership Award, 1987
- Milwaukee Bar Association Lawyer of the Year, 1989
- Charles L. Goldberg Distinguished Service Award for Lifetime Achievement in the Legal Profession, Wisconsin Law Foundation, 2002
- Judge Myron L. Gordon Lifetime Achievement Award, Eastern District of Wisconsin Bar Association, 2003
- "The Defender" William Coffey Memorial Award for Professionalism in Field of Criminal Law, 2005
- Selected to Wisconsin Super Lawyers, 2005 - 2020
- Named in top 25 Milwaukee Super Lawyers – 2012, 2013, 2015, 2016, 2017
- Named one of the "Best Lawyers in America" for Criminal Defense, White Collar – Best Lawyers Magazine
- Big Pi Lifetime Achievement Award by Pi Lambda Phi Fraternity

When asked what he remembers significantly as President of the Rotary Club of Milwaukee, minus being diagnosed with cancer during his term and successfully undergoing surgery and treatment for the disease, Frank is proud of raising the banner of diversity within the Club.

As is the Club's practice, the outgoing President identifies the successor. Frank chose a young woman, Julie Pedretti to succeed him. Julie was the second female President of our Club's then 89 year history. Frank remembers being told it would ruin the Club, Frank's reaction was, *"if we don't begin to reflect the diversity of our community, five years from now we can meet in a phone booth."* Obviously, Frank's leadership was correct. Since Julie's term 18 years ago, four other women have served as President with Karen Hung destined to assume the mantle in 2022.

Frank stands out as the unique combination of criminal defense attorney and community activist. His dedication to both has enriched the lives of us all.



*Editor's Note: We feature the popular Rotary People of Action series bi-monthly. The week of July 24th will profile Wendell Willis. Rotary People of Action is written by Rotarian Barbara Velez.*

