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LIFETIME ACHIEVERS

Our 12th annual awards honor lawyers whose remarkable careers have shaped the legal profession.

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ROBERT HELMAN | Mayer Brown

DURING A CAREER SPANNING A HALF CENTURY, ROBERT HELMAN has been an integral part of Chicago and its legal community. Not only did he arguably save Mayer Brown, but he's been a major force in the philanthropic, cultural and social life of the city.

In 1984, when Helman took over as co-chairman of the firm now known as Mayer Brown, the institution was at a precarious juncture. A group of six partners had defected with 12 associates to start a Chicago office for Skadden, Arps, Slate, Meagher & Flom. Even more troubling, the firm's largest client, Continental Bank, filed for bankruptcy that summer. The bank accounted for more than 30 percent of the firm's business.

"Everybody thought we would fail," says Helman, 81, who recalls that *The American Lawyer* wasn't optimistic about the firm's chances, either. An article at the time chronicling the firm's predicament was titled "Deck Chairs on the Titanic."

But Helman and his co-chairman Leo Herzel righted the ship. "It was pretty clear some change was required," says Helman, who served as chairman until 1998. (Herzel stepped down in 1991 and died in 2011.) They made the firm more democratic, by moving to an elected management committee; altered compensation to be more merit-based; attracted more lateral partners; opened new offices and grew others; and expanded the client base to include New York-based investment banks.

"He guided the firm through these treacherous waters and did it with an enormous sacrifice of his personal life," says Mayer Brown partner Joel Williamson, who recalls Helman working day and night. Partner Stephen Shapiro describes Helman as someone who would jump on a plane to meet a potential client. Shapiro, who



founded Mayer Brown's esteemed appellate practice, credits him with having the vision to attract appellate and Supreme Court litigators in one of the first major practices of its type.

Helman also has shown that he cares about more than business. "I believe lawyers have an obligation to do more than practice law and make money," he says. He's most proud of his efforts to help create the Legal Assistance Foundation of Metropolitan Chicago, which provides free legal services to the poor. He served as its president from 1974 to 1975. In 2001 the Chicago Bar Association awarded him one of its first Justice John Paul Stevens Awards for extraordinary integrity and community service. Mayer Brown, with Helman and his wife, Janet, have endowed in his name a professorship at Northwestern University School of Law, which has supported scholarship in war crime tribunals. For the last nine years Helman has been a lecturer at the University of Chicago Law School.

"No one has been more active socially and culturally in the life of the city than Bob," says Williamson. Helman still comes into the office four days a week to help other partners with legal issues and to boost spirits. "Largely I'm a cheerleader," he says, noting that he regularly sends messages congratulating others at the firm for their successes. Says Williamson: "He's volunteered to retire, but we refuse." —SUSAN BECK

Best Advice He Ever Received About the Law:

"Lead by example, maintaining a sympathetic understanding of the human condition and a generosity of mind and spirit."