Thank you
September 19, 2019

Dear Ron,

Congratulations on your receipt of the ABA Death Penalty Representation Project’s Leadership Award! We cannot thank you enough for your tireless efforts over so many years to support our work and the work of so many others in the pro bono and capital defense communities. In honor of your award, many of your friends, supporters, and colleagues wrote to us, sharing their thoughts about you and this well-deserved honor. As you’ll see, they had much more to say than we could fit into the event program, so we have printed all their comments here instead. We lead off, naturally, with a Top Ten list (which, we’re sure you’ll note, actually contains eleven items).

On behalf of the Project, its past and current staff and leadership, and the countless people that have been helped by its efforts over the years, thank you for your incomparable contributions to equal justice for all.

Sincerely,

Emily, Callie, Laura, and Sylvia
ABA Death Penalty Representation Project
Top Ten (Occasionally Lighthearted) Reasons to Honor Ron Tabak

By Marc Bookman

10. His prescient and public condemnation of the New York death penalty statute immediately after its passage in 1995 foretold the ruling that the statute was unconstitutional nine years later.

9. His many law review articles, journals and panels have provided guidance and materials for countless motions and appeals.

8. Even though he’s worked all these years at a small firm no one has ever heard of, he’s still managed to make an impact on death penalty litigation.

7. Ron’s endless work on behalf of his friend and client Johnny Lee Gates in Georgia has literally kept him alive through decades of hard-fought litigation.

7. If you look up Ron on Wikipedia, you will learn that he is not the former lead singer of the band Prism.

6. While everyone else was sleeping through Legal Defense Fund conferences, Ron was not only awake but assiduously taking notes to tell the rest of us what we’d missed.

5. As a pro bono leader in the community, he has not only recruited and inspired others to follow the path of pro bono commitment, but has led the way through his own tireless and hands on efforts in helping those facing execution.

4. Even though he’s meshuggah, he’s still right almost all of the time.

3. After winning a first Supreme Court case, many lawyers would quit while they were ahead and return to safe and cautious litigation. Ron’s experience, to the contrary, only whetted his appetite, leading to a long career of great victories and painful defeats that are the hallmark of true
2. He honestly believes that he is funny
1. Thankfully, his good deeds far outweigh his sense of humor

This community is fortunate beyond words to have Ron among us. He is unselfish, devoted, and endlessly generous. Ron’s sense of humor is unique and has been the source of much joy, which was sometimes in very short supply.

- Elisabeth Semel

We all owe Ron a great debt for his many years of service to the capital defense community including client representation and assisting in recruiting many firms that helped save many lives.

- John H. Blume

This honor for Ron is richly, richly deserved.

- James W. Ellis

Thank you, Ron. The world is a better place because of you.

- Robin M. Maher

It is impossible to assemble in one place all of Ron’s contributions to improving our justice system and fighting for fairness for his capital clients. We would live in a decidedly darker society without Ron’s decades of service. We are grateful, Ron.

- George H. Kendall
Ron has been a friend and colleague for 40 years. His dedication to pro bono work and specifically death penalty representation has been an inspiration to all his Skadden colleagues and the bar generally. This recognition is very well deserved.

- John A. Donovan

Ron was a pioneer in developing the infrastructure that so many firms use now to support pro bono work, and he was a vital resource and inspiration for those of us who took those hardest of cases, the death row inmate. Thank you for inspiring me!

- Tina Tchen

Congratulations Ron! Well-deserved!

- Jeff Dasteel

Ron has set the standard in pro bono service.

- Bruce Goldner

Congratulations. Well deserved. You are a true pro bono pioneer.

- Scott D. Musoff

Ron, you have been a trouper in this work for a long time, from the halls of the nation’s largest organizations to the courts where our clients are fighting for their lives. Congratulations on this well-deserved honor.

- Ruth Friedman
I congratulate Ron on this wonderful honor! A true leader not only on death penalty representation but in spearheading the incredibly diverse pro bono practice at Skadden.

- Vered Rabia

Ron’s work has been singularly important in the national effort to abolish the death penalty and to provide death row inmates access to skilled legal representation. He is a tribute to the highest calling of the legal profession.

- Steven Napolitano

Ron’s dedication to helping others is unparalleled. Happy to see him being honored. The good guys do deserve to finish first sometimes.

- David J. Friedman

I am so pleased to support this recognition of Ron’s extraordinary work to improve the quality of counsel in capital cases.

- Cassandra Stubbs

Ron has long been a hero to the many defense attorneys who represent individuals charged with a capital offense. It is an honor to honor him!

- Karen M. Gottlieb

Ron, I am proud to salute your unwavering dedication to representing individuals on death row and your commitment to a fair and just criminal justice system.

- Susan M. Hoffman
Death Penalty Focus is grateful to Ron Tabak for his deep commitment to justice for condemned prisoners everywhere.

- Nancy Haydt

Since my very first meeting as a member of the Project through my term as Chair, Ron has been a generous source of authoritative knowledge regarding capital representation. His devotion to the cause of competent death penalty representation is unmatched.

- Robert L. Rothman

Ron has been both an inspiration and a guiding hand throughout my years doing capital defense. It is a privilege to know and work with him.

- Madeline S. Cohen

Warmest thanks and kudos to Ron for your indefatigable, indispensable work.

- Carol Steiker & Jordan Steiker

This is a well-deserved honor for Ron. Our whole community recognizes his tireless pro bono contribution to capital defense.

- Russell Stetler

Ron has always been an outstanding Capital litigator, an untiring leader in the death penalty community, and a true friend. Thank you, Ron

- Richard C. Dieter
Ron Tabak is the platinum bar of the community advocating against the death penalty today. This is a little odd for a guy who is also the Zelig of the movement. But, then again, it is also somewhat unusual for someone to be able to write both paragraphs of balanced prose and top-ten lists and have the two be indistinguishable to outside observers.

Seriously, Ron in all contexts provides a model of fair, moderate, fact-based advocacy – an example well worthy of emulation at all times, and never more so than today. The Death Penalty Representation Project made an inspired choice in singling him out for special honor.

- Eric M. Freedman

The Project Leadership Award to Ron aptly expresses the esteem and admiration of our entire community. Ron’s dedication, thoughtfulness as a planner, depth and breadth of knowledge as a consultant, effectiveness as an advocate in many diverse forums, and selfless, tireless labor to understand and mobilize all of those details in which the Devil of the death penalty dwells, have been a constant inspiration to us all. Thanks to the Project for its recognition of the immense debt that we owe this very special colleague.

- Anthony G. Amsterdam

The Section of Civil Rights and Social Justice is thrilled to congratulate Ron Tabak on receiving the Death Penalty Representation Project’s 2019 Project Leadership Award. Back in 2014, the Section awarded Ron the Robert F. Drinan Distinguished Service Award for his sustained commitment to the Section and its mission of providing leadership to the legal profession in protecting and advancing human rights, civil
liberties, and social justice. There are few people more deserving of such awards.

Ron is a champion of fairness and due process in capital punishment cases. He has been a forceful and effective leader in the ABA’s efforts to recruit and train lawyers for indigent death row inmates, and in 1997, along with the Section’s Criminal Justice Committee, spearheaded the ABA’s call for a moratorium on executions until due process concerns are resolved. He has chaired the Section’s Death Penalty Committee since its inception in 2002 and serves as a Special Advisor to the Death Penalty Due Process Review Project Steering Committee in addition to his work with the Representation Project. He previously chaired the Task Force on Mental Disability and the Death Penalty, whose proposals were adopted as policies by the American Psychological Association and the American Psychiatric Association. He successfully argued Francis v. Franklin, a death penalty case in the U.S. Supreme Court, which upheld the Fourteenth Amendment’s requirement that the State prove every element of a criminal offense beyond a reasonable doubt. He played a leading role in securing the removal from death row of Johnny Lee Gates, a man with intellectual disabilities who was convicted of capital crimes he may not have committed.

Ron also has spoken on capital punishment at numerous conferences, including those sponsored by the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Ninth Circuit, the Arizona state court system, and the Federal Bar Council; and on pro bono matters, habeas corpus, and civil rights at numerous law schools, bar associations, before civic groups, and on television and radio. Even his ‘day job’ – as Special Counsel at Skadden, Arps, Slate, Meagher & Flom LLP, coordinating the firm’s pro bono practice – is all about public service. Under his supervision, each year hundreds of Skadden attorneys handle pro bono cases suitable to their practices and interests. He also is a
member of the advisory committee for the renowned Skadden Fellowship Program.

Ron’s superb public service work has been honored by, among others, The Black Law Students Association of Rutgers School of Law; the New York Criminal Bar Association; the New York State Bar Association; the Legal Aid Society; MFY Legal Services; the Association of the Bar of the City of New York; the Southern Center for Human Rights; the New York State Association of Criminal Defense Lawyers; the Fortune Society; and The American Lawyer.

We are proud that Ron has been a longtime leader within the Section of Civil Rights and Social Justice, and the Death Penalty Due Process Review Project, on top of his work with the Representation Project. It is with great respect and affection that CRSJ congratulates Ron today.

- ABA Section of Civil Rights and Social Justice

Dear Ron:

The NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund, Inc. has no better friend and colleague than you in the fight against the death penalty. As you know, LDF’s efforts to abolish the death penalty has been a core part of our advocacy to secure the rights and recognize the humanity of African Americans, and you have been an instrumental part of that work. That is especially true through your leadership in the American Bar Association, which has made a profound difference in so many lives, as well as the legal profession at large. We are incredibly grateful for your longstanding participation in our annual capital punishment conference - your now-famous “Top Ten Lists” have become one of our most beloved conference traditions. Thank you, Ron, for all that you have done in the struggle for justice in our unjust capital punishment system.

- Your friends at NAACP LDF
When I think about Ron Tabak, I think about dedication, excellence, perseverance, a deep moral center and a heart for justice. Ron Tabak is the preeminent advocate and a dear and steadfast friend. Ron is the best kind of friend. The friend who will tell you what other people will not. He is the friend who will hold you accountable. His friendship lifts you up in a way that mere flattery cannot. You come to believe in your value as a person, because Ron reminds of your worth by making the investment in being your friend. Most importantly when I think about Ron Tabak, I think of these words from Micah 6:8

And what does the Lord require of you?
To act justly and to love mercy
and to walk humbly with your God.

Micah 6:8 seeks to tell us the meaning of good. Ron Tabak is good.

- Diann Rust-Tierney

Ron has been an inspiration, a faithful guide to all that is wrong in this death penalty system. His written advocacy work is consistently current, provocative, thorough, and persuasive. I think of him as #1 on our top 10 list of abolition advocates.

- Margery B. Koosed