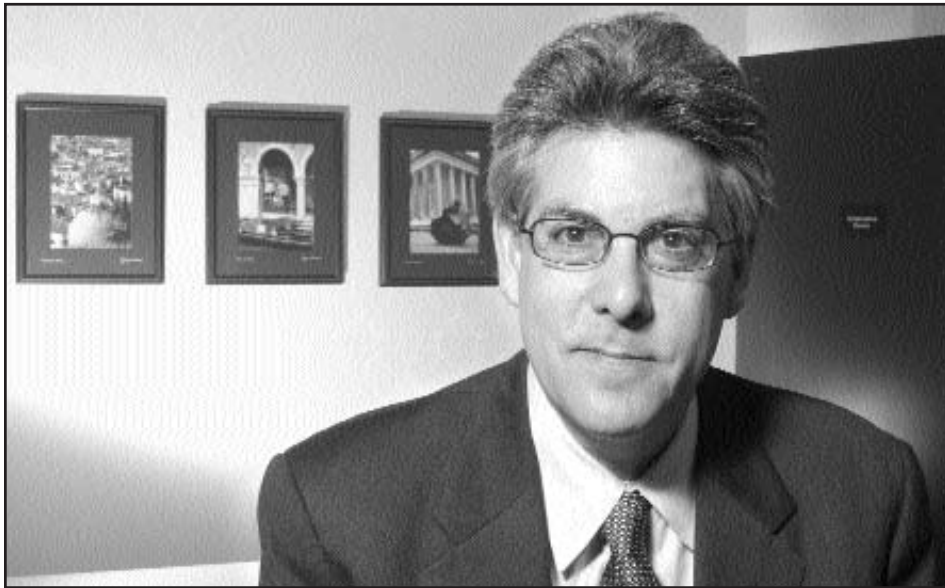


# In life and art, it's people who are Freedman's focus



Attorney Jeffrey Freedman at Bar Association of Erie County headquarters in downtown Buffalo, where some of his photographs are on display.

By ANNEMARIE FRANCYK  
*Business First*

If there is a theme to Jeffrey Freedman's modus operandi, it is his focus on people. Literally and figuratively.

Freedman has kept the human condition at the center of most everything he does, whether it is as the lawyer for the disenfranchised, the advocate for just causes or the widely traveled photographer.

## The lawyer

Whether you have needed Freedman's legal services or not, you are familiar with him. He is the ubiquitous lawyer for the bankrupt, disabled and injured whose visage smiles benignly from billboards, print ads and other commercial space throughout Western New York, where his law firm has grown to 13 offices.

That presence has been in the works since 1976, when Freedman graduated from Western New England School of Law and got his first assignments as the new hire at Gannon & Gannon, a general law practice in Buffalo. All the bankruptcy cases were shifted to his desk.

"No one wanted to do bankruptcies because the fees were low and the law was difficult," Freedman says. "I was able to get results pretty quickly, helping people fight the banks, save their houses and their cars."

The partners probably could not predict the career they launched. In 1980, Freedman struck out on his own, took his secretary with him and created what today is the region's 30th largest law firm, with a dozen attorneys and a staff of almost 60. It might not have grown to such an extent without the U.S. Supreme Court's Bates decision in 1977, removing the prohibition on attorneys advertising. It was a bold move for Freedman to combine advertis-

ing with bankruptcy law, says Evelyn Mietlowski, his secretary of 23 years.

"He started this big company when everyone was saying, 'You're specializing in what?' and when he started advertising, they said, 'Oh my God.' He really was a pioneer," Mietlowski says.

That entrepreneurial spirit likely was inherited from Freedman's grandfather, Samuel Freedman, who purchased a small bakery named Kaufman's toward the end of the Great Depression. The business, identified by a Jolly Little Baker and a rye bread jingle, would grow to include large wholesale and retail accounts across the region and give at least three generations a place to punch in at 3 a.m. Throughout high school and college, Jeffrey Freedman bagged, toted, delivered and sold Kaufman's products, and one day looked around at the number of siblings and cousins his age doing the same thing. He decided to go into another line of work.

Freedman went to law school, where he says he struggled with memorizing tedious facts. (To this day, he says he will have the occasional nightmare about not passing a class.) But he persevered.

"I wasn't looking to make the most money. I wanted to make a good living and help people," Freedman says.

While building a busy bankruptcy practice, Freedman noticed that a good number of his clients found themselves in bad financial shape because they were unemployed, uninsured and had mounting medical problems. And so, in 1986, the firm expanded to include Social Security disability and personal injury law, with the hiring of Christopher Kerr, now a partner in the firm.

"Jeff is a true believer. That comes from his personal knowledge of what our clients go through. He puts them at ease, lets them

## Jeffrey Freedman

■ **Family:** Oldest of three siblings. Met his wife, Barbara Hamilton, at the Rue Franklin when it was a coffeehouse. They were married in 1981.

■ **Work week:** 50 hours

■ **Education:** Bennett High School, undergraduate degree from American University's school of public administration, law degree from Western New England School of Law

know they are not alone in this and maintains their self-esteem at a difficult time," Kerr says.

## The advocate

Lawyers are bound by professional honor to donate legal services to the poor, nonprofit groups and others that would have little access to legal advocacy. Freedman appears to be among the most enthusiastic of volunteers, spending about a third of his time working on pro bono activities.

Barbara Hamilton, Freedman's wife of 22 years, says her husband more than puts his name to a cause. He is out there walking for the walk-a-thon, for example, and he brings family with him.

"He doesn't do it because he has to. He feels he's been lucky and he wants to share," Hamilton says.

One of his long-time favorite groups is the Lupus Alliance of America, having had clients with the condition. Freedman began his association with the group by presenting programs on disability law to members of the organization's Western New York affiliate, but that evolved to a more personal relationship, says Honi Kurzeja, executive director.

Freedman has seen the organization from all angles: He served on the board, he attends fund-raising events, he makes himself available to Kurzeja for legal information. He is hands-on, she says.

"He actually comes out and volunteers with us. He schleps tables, carries stuff and wants to be busy," Kurzeja says.

Freedman is similarly active with Everywoman Opportunity Center, the American Jewish Committee and Consumer Credit Counseling, and other organizations to such a degree that his pro bono work has been recognized by the state and local bar associations. A founding member of the National Association of

Consumer Bankruptcy Attorneys, he has lobbied in Washington in defense of debtors' rights.

Not all of his advocacy is out in front, however. Mietlowski recalls a few years ago when Freedman came to the rescue, offering her unlimited overtime when her husband suddenly lost his job on Christmas Eve when his company was sold.

"(Freedman) told me he finds this sort of thing totally unconscionable and would never do such a thing to his employees," she said.

## The photographer

One of Freedman's favorite topics these days is his photography hobby, something he taught himself after a "point and shoot" trip to Thailand in 1994. He uses a Cannon 35-mm camera, sometimes two, to capture people of different cultures doing everyday things like working in their homes or going to school.

When he's not giving copies of his work away, Freedman has shown his work at the restaurants around town, at the CEPA Gallery, the Jewish Center and the headquarters of the Bar Association of Erie County.

Though rather new at photography, Freedman has developed a distinctive style that's easy to recognize. He will get close to his subjects, filling the frame with their image in a candid shot that captures a moment out of their day. In Freedman's work, you can count the wrinkles in an elderly woman's face and nearly feel the chapped skin of a toddler's cheeks.

How does he get this close to his subjects? Freedman says the camera gives him a way to interact with people he normally would not be able to meet. Try to become friendly with people, he says, and they generally will open up to you.

His wife Barbara recalls when Freedman seized the opportunity of a broken-down tour bus deep in Thailand to wander into the jungle to get some more shots. Down the path a ways, he found a cluster of families in their thatched-roof huts and, though they did not share a common word, his new-found subjects warmed up to the smiling Westerner with the camera hanging from his neck. Freedman emerged from the small village with a series of photos.

Since that first trip to the Orient, he has been on photography forays to Europe — several times — to Hong Kong, Mexico, Brazil and Peru as well as throughout the United States and Canada. Some have been arranged through Fotoworkshops of the Palm Beach Photographic Centre. The Florida organization offers educational activities, photographic opportunities and travel groups that include many professional photographers who share techniques with hobbyists like Freedman.