

## Macomb County LEGAL NEWS

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– Photo by John Meiu

Members of A (Habeas) Chorus Line troupe are (left to right): Michael Leibson, Angela Williams, Justin Klimko, Brian Figot, James Robb, Judy Zorn, Joseph LaBella, Mark Lezotte and Sara Fischer.

By Sheila Pursglove  
Legal News

If there's a rhyme for words like "burqa," "prosthesis" and "symbiosis," attorney Justin Klimko will find a way.

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Klimko, a corporate transaction attorney with Butzel Long in Detroit — as well as the firm's president and self-described CCH (Chief Cat-Herder) — is lyricist for A (Habeas) Chorus Line, a musical parody troupe whose members are almost all lawyers.

The exception is Sara Fischer Hodges, a former case manager in the U.S. District Court for the Eastern District of Michigan.

Besides Klimko, other members are Michael Leibson, former assistant U.S. Attorney; Joseph LaBella, vice president, director of Contracts for Jack Morton Worldwide; Angela Williams, deputy general counsel with the Detroit Housing Commission; Judy Zorn, a Rochester Hills attorney; Mark Lezotte, an attorney with Butzel Long in Detroit; Southfield attorney Brian Figot, executive director of the Federal Bar Association, Eastern District of Michigan Chapter; and Jim Robb, associate dean and senior counsel of Cooley Law School in Lansing.

Robb serves as musical director and the troupe's orchestra, band and sound effects man.

The legal lampooners — Klimko describes AHCL as a cross between Capitol Steps and Forbidden Broadway, with influences such as Tom Lehrer and British duo Flanders and Swann — first teamed up in 1992 to perform at a dinner dance for the Detroit chapter of the Federal Bar Association.

The one-time goofy gig morphed into a new "career," with around 150 performances at seminars, conventions, holiday parties, business meetings, fund-raisers, dinners and other events around the state and country.

AHCL parodies include plenty of show tunes and pop numbers as well as some original works. To the delight of legal and non-legal audiences, no one is safe from barbs — from judges to lawyers to politicians to celebrities, local issues to national and international events.

Klimko is often asked how he comes up with song ideas.

"I don't have a very good pat answer," he says. "Songs tend to come in one of two ways — most of the time, I choose a topic that I want to parody and then look for an appropriate song. But also I often have a song I want to use and look for an appropriate topic. This probably accounts for about 20 percent of our songs, and it often takes a lot longer to find something."

For example, for several years he looked for a topic for the song made famous by Nancy Sinatra, "These Boots Are Made for Walking," but had a complete block.

"Then I suddenly got an idea, and the result was 'Reboot It While We're Talking,' in which a help desk person tells everyone who calls with a problem just to reboot the computer — a situation every network computer user has encountered," he says.

An "appropriate" song has to be recognizable to at least a good portion of the audience and have a lyrical structure that's sufficient to support a parody, he explains.

"Some songs are just too sparse lyrically to use. On the other hand, although most of our parodies are of well-known pop songs or Broadway show tunes, we do have some

completely original works for which I've done the lyrics and Jim has written original music — he's a very talented musician.”

Examples include “Quitclaim Your Love,” “The Tax Code Rap,” “Keep It Zipped” and “The Michigan Song.”

A good parody uses a well-known song, with a play on the words of the original.

“You can't use a tune just because it has the right meter or number of syllables — the audience has to recognize the original lyrics in the parody,” says Klimko, who adds that trying to pick his favorite parody would be like trying to pick a favorite child.

Groan-making AHCL lampoons include “Can't Get Text to You,” skewering disgraced Detroit mayor Kwame Kilpatrick; “696” — to the tune of “Route 66” — an homage to potholed Detroit freeways; and “Little Goose Poop” —to the tune of “Little Deuce Coupe” — the troupe's tribute to everyone's favorite lawn-fouling fowl.

Presidents are not immune from barbs: Clinton took his lumps in “Bimbo No. 5,” to the tune of “Mambo No. 5”; Bush No. 43 was immortalized in “Let's Mispronounce,” to the tune of “Let's Misbehave”; while the recent denizen of the White House is showcased in “Obama Told Me Not to Come,” to the tune of “Mama Told Me Not to Come.”

“I think a parody has to be funny but have a little bite to it — it's satire, after all, it should be saying something,” Klimko says. “I try to avoid using stilted syntax to get a rhyme; the language should be natural. I also enjoy making unusual or unexpected rhymes.”

Song ideas pop into his head at all times of the day and in all circumstances.

“Usually, I try to send myself an e-mail to put the idea in writing and then later transfer the idea to a running list that I keep,” he said.

Klimko — who says that performing has helped develop his communication skills as well as skills when presenting legal education seminars — enjoys immensely seeing something he has written make an audience laugh and enjoy themselves.

“I find performing to be an absolute gas,” he says. “Sometimes the audience can sense the next line that's coming, and sometimes they're completely unprepared. Both are fun to watch unfold.

“I also enjoy our surprise element. When we go to a new gig, some of the audience members wear an expression that seems to say, ‘OK, I'm going to watch a bunch of lawyers sing. How good could this possibly be?’ Afterwards, many of those same people tell us how hard they laughed and comment that they can't believe how professional the performance is.”

Juggling performances with careers can be difficult, especially trying to coordinate the schedules of nine busy people.

“It requires a degree of commitment and also flexibility,” Klimko says. “I think we all find it a welcome respite from the pressures of our day jobs.

We spend a lot of time laughing, which makes rehearsal easier to take. And after more

than two decades together, the troupe has an unspoken understanding of and among everyone, so it feels really natural to be together.”

According to music director Jim Robb, to the best of his knowledge AHCL is the only parody or satire group in metro Detroit and perhaps in Michigan.

“We’re not simply a novelty based on our being lawyers,” he says. “Although we did start out with what we thought would be a one-time performance in 1992, we’ve developed a huge repertoire of nearly 500 pieces, many of which — though funny and light-hearted — are real commentary on modern life.

Robb said Klimko “has especially aimed his sharp-pointed pen at corrupt politicians, at people and companies who cheat and steal, at self-anointed ‘personalities’ who contribute nothing to society, and at all sorts of people who say and do foolish things.

“So, although Justin indeed is very inventive and clever with his lampooning,” Robb said, “his work is serious commentary of the sort that no one in Michigan is doing. Indeed, many of the songs do have a ‘bite’ to them, and that’s because the points Justin is making are right on the mark.”

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