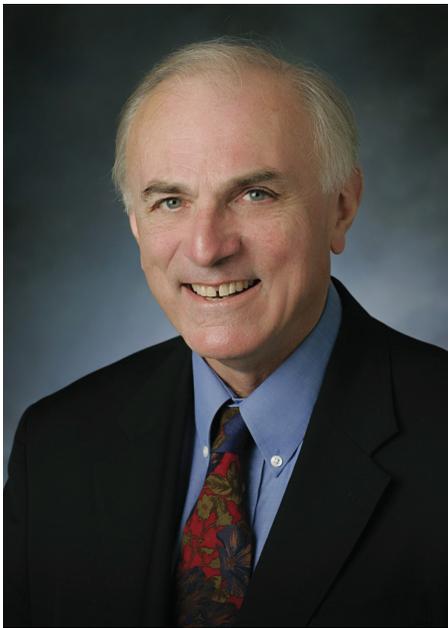


# PROFILES IN THE LAW

*Jonathan Ater Finds Personal Rewards in Helping Others*

## Crusader for Mental Health

By Cliff Collins



Jonathan A. Ater

In 1965, Jonathan A. Ater came out of Yale Law School determined to change the world. After clerking for U.S. District Court Judge Gus J. Solomon, he learned how.

Ater says Solomon was “a classic New Deal liberal” who was a profound influence on him and his wife, Deanne.

Ater subsequently wasted no time in applying his inspired social conscience, joining Krause, Lindsay & Nahstoll, among the Northwest’s oldest law firms and one with a long tradition of community involvement.

The firm changed names several times, settling in 1990 on Ater, Wynne, Hewitt, Dodson & Skerritt, which was shortened in 1998 to Ater Wynne. But it never abandoned its penchant for being socially active, he says, and Ater himself has been “the spirit of our firm in public service,” says managing partner Michael W. Shackelford.

Last fall, Jonathan and Deanne Ater received recognition for their years of dedication to a particular area of strong interest for the couple. The two were honored by the National Alliance on Mental Illness of Oregon, with the Gordon and Sharon Smith New Freedom Award. The annual award recognizes advocacy for individuals living with mental illness and their family members. Former U.S. Sen. Smith and his wife presented their namesake award at a dinner Oct. 21.

“The Aters turned their family experience with mental illness into a personal crusade that has helped improve Oregon’s mental health system for countless individuals and families,” says Chris Bouneff, executive director of the alliance’s Oregon chapter. “Their willingness to continue speaking out, both publicly and privately, serves as inspiration to... others.”

Jonathan Ater is “an advocate and a strong proponent of a better state hospital system,” adds Richard Harris, assistant director of the Oregon Mental Health and Addiction Services Division. “He’s been very active for advocating for (mental health care) access for families, and advocating for improved conditions at the state hospital.”

Phillip D. Chadsey, a retired Stael Rives attorney who has known Ater for years, says one of Ater’s important contributions to improving mental health care was his leadership in helping establish regulations following passage of a mental health parity bill in the Legislature, which required insurers to cover mental health care in the same fashion they do other forms of health care.

### The Importance of Family

Ater was born in Chicago and raised in Amarillo, Texas. His parents were the

first in his family to obtain a college degree, and Ater was expected to do the same. But probably no one predicted that would occur at faraway Yale University, no one except a fellow citizen of Amarillo, Ed Roberts, who was a Yale alum and took it upon himself to help recruit deserving, promising young people for the Ivy League school. Once he enrolled, Ater loved that “formidable institution,” but also soon met and loved Deanne there; they married when both were 20 years old.

In college, Ater had not decided on a vocation, but he enjoyed and excelled in a class taught by Charles Black about the law. “My debate for years was journalism or law,” says Ater, who knew few lawyers but had a grandfather who was a newspaperman. Black encouraged him to apply to law school at Yale, and Ater received financial aid and was accepted.

“When that letter came, I was thinking of the Peace Corps or journalism,” but he concluded that the opportunity was too good to pass up, he says. He worked on the *Yale Law Journal* and was awarded the Order of the Coif.

When Ater got a clerkship in Oregon with Judge Solomon, he and Deanne and their 2-year-old son drove cross country in their Volkswagen bus, with a second child on the way. “We were here not very long and said this was a good place to be,” he says of Portland.

The Aters’ efforts to achieve social justice cannot be understood fully without noting the importance the two place on family. When Deanne Ater was a college student in New York, she went on a field trip to an orphanage, visiting rooms of unadopted children. A young girl, probably of Puerto Rican descent, clung to her. From then on, Deanne Ater was



Recognizing his longstanding advocacy for individuals living with mental illness, Ater was recently honored by the National Alliance on Mental Illness of Oregon with the Gordon and Sharon Smith New Freedom Award. Ater is seen here with the award's namesakes, Sharon Smith and former U.S. Sen. Gordon Smith (left), and his wife, Deanne, right.

committed to creating a family that included minority children who might not otherwise be adopted.

Today the Aters have seven children, four of whom are adopted and are of mixed races. In addition, the Aters served as host family to exchange students from Kenya and Germany, as well as various American youth in transition from one life stage to another. Jonathan Ater had been an exchange student himself in high school, living in Berlin in 1956.

"They're committed to the idea that family is something important," Harris observes of the couple. "Jonathan and his wife bring that idea to mental health services."

Ater served for four years as chair of the Oregon Commission on Children and Families, then later served as co-chair of the Governor's 2004 Mental Health Task Force. He also played a key role in health care reform, co-chairing both the Oregon Health Fund Board and the Oregon Health Policy Commission. Ater served on two working groups that advised senior management of the Oregon Department of Human Resources, and he is past chairman of the Albertina Kerr Foundation.

Deanne Ater, who holds two master's degrees, one in social work, worked as a school counselor and has served on several boards of agencies that provide social services to mentally ill and disabled people. She also has provided pro bono mental health counseling services for William Temple House in Portland.

Jonathan Ater credits his wife for being "a substantial influence on my thinking and work. We strengthen each other," he says.

Of course, aside from his volunteer work, Ater has made his mark as a business attorney for four decades. He chairs Ater Wynne and has had extensive experience with emerging businesses and turnarounds. His clients include health care professionals and institutions, resource industries, utilities and high-tech companies.

"What I really enjoy most is that the practice of law allows you to help people in times of often considerable need, and to become part of helping people solve their problems," he says. "That's the great personal reward in the work."

*Cliff Collins is a Portland-area freelance writer and a frequent contributor to the Bulletin.*

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