You’ve heard of power couples. We’d like to introduce you to the Empower Couple, attorneys Michael and Myra Gilfix. Since the very beginning of their careers, Michael and Myra have devoted themselves to empowering elders and individuals with disabilities, protecting patients’ rights, and tirelessly advocating for the most vulnerable among us. They are shining examples of what the Theresa Awards are all about.

We could write a book on their accomplishments, a rather long and inspiring one, but for the purposes of this article we’ll have to limit ourselves to an overview.

Upon graduating from Stanford Law School, Michael and Myra could have become well-paid associate attorneys at any number of prestigious law firms. Fortunately for all of us, they chose a different path.

In 1973, Michael graduated from Stanford and created Senior Adults Legal Assistance with full support of his then-law student wife. It was the first program in the country dedicated to providing free legal services to elders. For ten years, Michael ran this program which is still going strong.

In 1974, the U.S. Senate began hearings focused on legal representation for seniors. As one of the few attorneys with any experience in this area, Michael was asked to testify at the hearings. This resulted in the award of a federal grant to establish “model” programs providing legal representation to elders. Michael traveled the country speaking at conferences and local seminars, educating thousands of attorneys and other professionals about the importance of what eventually became known as Elder Law. (Michael and Myra even created and trademarked the term “Elder Law” in the early 80’s, but eventually donated it to NAELA so NAELA would have unlimited use of the term.)

During this time, in 1976 to be exact, Michael and Myra also founded The Disability Law Center. It was one of the first organizations in the country to provide free legal services for individuals with disabilities. As a pioneer in this area, Myra developed the legal language for some of the very first Special Needs Trusts created in California.

Myra graduated from the Stanford Law School in 1976. She went to work as a volunteer patient advocate at Our Health Center, a community clinic in Santa Clara County. She served on its Board of Directors and continued her passion for enhancing patients’ rights.
In 1987, along with a prescient group of attorneys that included Vincent J. Russo, Michael and Myra co-founded NAELA with the mission to educate, inspire, serve, and provide community to attorneys with practices in elder law and special needs planning. NAELA currently has nearly 4,000 members across the United States, Canada, Australia, and the United Kingdom.

In the late 1980s, Michael and Myra took on two crucial patients’ rights cases. First, in 1988, they successfully litigated California’s signature “right-to-die” case, *In Re Drabick*. This case made important law in the area of independence and medical decision making.

Then, in 1989, the U.S. Supreme Court heard its first right-to-die case, *Cruzan v. Director, Missouri Department of Health*. Nancy Cruzan had been diagnosed as being in a persistent vegetative state. She was on life support and needed a feeding tube. The petitioners, Nancy and her parents, wanted the feeding tube removed, which would in essence allow Nancy to pass away. Michael and Myra coauthored the Brief Amicus Curiae for NAELA on behalf of the petitioners. Cruzan proved to be a landmark case and ultimately led to the creation of advance health directives. And who was instrumental in creating the language that we use today in living wills and advance directives? History and a review of conference materials and writings point to Myra Gilfix.

Among his many books and other published works, in 1991 Michael co-authored with Professor John Regan the widely used form book *Tax, Estate, and Financial Planning for the Elderly: Forms and Practice*. As one would expect, Myra wrote the chapter on health care decision making.

Myra, consistently a step ahead, continues to support and create practical tools for family members to serve as empowered patient advocates, particularly in hospital settings.

Oh, lest we forget, along the way Michael and Myra somehow found time to create a law firm in 1983. Gilfix & La Poll Associates, LLP is now one of the largest and most respected elder law firms in the country. Over the course of 35-plus years, the firm has protected the safety and well-being of thousands of elders and individuals with disabilities… a mission that is more important now than ever as we navigate the Coronavirus pandemic.

For all that they have done to protect elders, individuals with disabilities, and patients’ rights, the Theresa Foundation is pleased to present Michael and Myra Gilfix with the 2020 Theresa Award.