



John Mitby: A Legacy of Giving Back

By Doug Moe



When Madison attorney John Mitby volunteered his time to help the organization that founded Sharing Active Independent Lives (SAIL) gain

nonprofit 501(c)(3) status in 2005, those who benefited were likely appreciative. But no one should have been surprised.

By then, Mitby's civic engagement – including helping make the Reddan Soccer Park in Verona a reality, as well as a nationally-lauded dormitory for disabled women at Camp Wawbeek in the Dells – was widely recognized in Madison and beyond.

Less well known is that for Mitby, 76, giving back to the community is tethered to an ethical compass he first witnessed in his father, Norman Mitby, who served as District Director of Madison Area Technical College from 1960 to 1988.

It may also not be generally known that along with the opportunity for pro bono philanthropic work, Mitby's life in the law has led to personal and professional friendships with numerous famous Wisconsin names.

Early on, working briefly in Green Bay, Mitby helped a few of Vince Lombardi's more colorful Packers out of late-night jams and once caddied for Max McGee when the legendary receiver lost his temper on the golf course after a poor shot.

"He threw his clubs in a pond,"

Mitby said. "I had to fish them out."

Mitby served as Donna Shalala's personal attorney during the former UW-Madison chancellor's Madison years. He helped her learn to play golf and Shalala in turn brought prospective donors to the University Ridge course. When John Powless quit coaching basketball, Mitby helped set in motion the west side tennis center that now bears Powless's name.

Sometimes celebrity, legal work and philanthropy could be integrated. Such was the case with an early Mitby client, Alex Jordan, creator and proprietor of the House on the Rock near Spring Green, one of the state's most popular tourist attractions.

In 1974, Jordan, beginning to be overwhelmed by the attention (he was an intensely private man), and thinking that continued expansion at the House on the Rock might require him to sell or take on a partner, went looking for a lawyer.

A mutual friend suggested Mitby – "I know a good young lawyer" – and Jordan, often willing to play a hunch, showed up at Mitby's office.

"He hired me," Mitby said, even though the young lawyer had never handled anything nearly as big as the potential sale of the House on the Rock.

Mitby handled the eventual sale of the House and represented Jordan until his death in 1989. Jordan left his fortune to longtime companion Jennie Olson with the understanding she

would establish a charitable foundation.

Mitby helped with that, and today is president of the Olson Foundation, which continues to make significant philanthropic gifts (\$400,000 in 2019) to organizations including Big Brothers Big Sisters of Dane County, the Goodman Community Center and SAIL.

Mitby is also president of the Van Wie Foundation, which has spearheaded numerous charitable successes in the Wisconsin Dells area, including the afore-mentioned Easter Seals Camp Wawbeek, one of the premier camps in the nation serving the disabled.

Given his inclusion in many "best" and "top" lawyer lists published regionally and nationally over many years, Mitby might seem to have been almost blueprinted for the law. But in fact, he was uncertain what to do upon graduating from college, and worked briefly in industrial engineering.

Mitby grew up in Green Bay, moving to Madison with his family just in time to attend West High School for his senior year, after his father Norm Mitby took the top job at MATC.

Mitby was a good athlete – despite having polio as a child – and played basketball and golf at West. He next attended UW-Madison. It was during this early time in Madison when Mitby witnessed an ethical stand from his father that resonated deeply.

It was around the holidays, and a local soda distributor brought an expensive set of knives to the Mitby house as a gift for Norm. The MATC account was

lucrative. Not only did Norm Mitby decline the gift, he used the offer as a spur to reassess the books and make sure all the profits from the campus canteens – they were considerable – were directed to students in need. He did it simply because it was the right thing to do.

“That stuck in my mind for a long time,” John Mitby said. Along with family and being a good lawyer, Mitby has prioritized giving back to the community, another way of saying helping others.

It was Norm Mitby’s prominence in Madison that originally led John Mitby to Green Bay for his first two years practicing law. It got him out of Norm’s shadow and he had fun with the Packers. But soon John and his wife, Julie – whom he met in law school at UW – were back in Madison. John landed at the Axley Byrnelson law firm. Julie switched paths, enrolled in medical school and became a radiologist.

It was the couple’s two daughters, Tana and Jenna, who drew Mitby to soccer. Mitby coached youth teams and at one point took a squad of fifth-graders to Denmark for two weeks. He was vastly impressed by the quality of the facilities and the programs available for female athletes. Mitby returned to Madison determined to try to emulate what he had seen.

It didn’t happen overnight, but in 1998, with Mitby on point, assisted by Mike Van Sicklen, the state-of-the-art Reddan Soccer Park – 40 acres a half-mile off Highway M on Cross Country Road – opened in Madison to rave reviews.

It continues as a stellar example of

Mitby’s ability to connect the dots on community projects.

“Sometimes somebody has the idea but not the money,” he said. “Other times somebody has the money but not the idea. You try to put the pieces together and make a difference.”

Mitby was called in not long after the Madison Area Continuing Care Consortium (now known as AgeBetter, Inc.) held a conference in the early 2000s focused on sustaining a good quality of life for people over 60.

“My role was to form the 501(c)(3),” Mitby recalled, of the AgeBetter project that became SAIL, but it went beyond that.

“We tried to look at the average 60 to 70-year-old couple,” he said, “and see what we could do to make a good, safe life for them in their homes.”

Mitby recalled that they curated and prequalified a list of vendors – plumbers, electricians, house painters, drivers and more. That was the start of one of SAIL’s most popular offerings. Other unique services such as a daily check-in system, medication reviews, and member-led groups were added shortly after thanks to the inspiration of the SAIL members – older adults ranging in age from 58-99.

SAIL also tapped into the university. “There are so many people in Madison who know about dementia and wellness and eating right and making a home safe,” Mitby said. “We brought all those people together.”

This year SAIL celebrates 15 years of bringing independence and community to older adults in Madison. The anniversary provides an opportunity

for the organization and its members to recognize the extraordinary amount of pro bono legal services and advice Mitby has provided across those 15 years.

John Mitby is not slowing down. His former law firm had a mandatory retirement age of 70, so in 2015 Mitby left and joined the Hurley Burish firm, where he continues his practice.

His philanthropy continues, too. Mitby is involved with 1800 Days in Madison – dedicated to reducing education achievement gaps – as well as the Blue Trunk Foundation, helping make travel accessible for the disabled.

“I wanted to give back,” he said, and few have done it better.

Doug Moe is the award-winning author of numerous critically-acclaimed non-fiction books, as well as thousands of newspaper columns and magazine articles. In addition to his books and journalism, he writes corporate, foundation and personal histories, all with a signature storytelling style that has earned him a devoted following across more than four decades.

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