

An Unconventional Approach

Law and advocacy in Benzie County

By Jenn Ryan

Current Contributor

Begun as the Benzonia Revitalization Project back in 2011, the large, concrete structure—painted bright aqua—on US-31, just north of M-115 (and Wesco) in Benzonia, is a local curiosity.

Deceptive from the exterior, evolution occurs within on the regular during this remodel phase. Repurposed glass allows southwest sunlight to filter through. Solid block walls insulate the rattling noise of the highway, just outside. Spacious from floor to ceiling, the industrial feel of the once-auto repair shop has been warmed with knotty pine paneling, silver-gray cedar shake wainscoting, and solid-core pine doors. Plants, artwork, vintage and contemporary furniture, and colorful textiles invite you down the hallway, piquing curiosity to explore further.

Although it continues to be a work in progress, phase one of the remodel project functions as a Law and Advocacy Center for three local attorneys, two staffers, and a sweet Jack Russell Terrier named Ruby—who will likely bark at you, initially, should you stop in for a visit.

The principals of the endeavor are attorney Jesse L. Williams, J.D., and business partner Eric L. VanDussen, a long-time local activist and freelance reporter. Other attorneys in the office include husband-and-wife Frederik F. Stig-Nielsen, J.D., and Mary E. “Betsy” Mas, J.D. (Editor’s Note: *The Betsie Current* pub-

lished an article with the pair back in 2014; read it at bit.ly/bnzboomerangs)*

At any given time, the types of cases that the advocacy center works on are diverse—from civil infractions to misdemeanor cases and felonies. In the technical, narrow sense, the term “civil law” describes the law that pertains to persons, things, and relationships that develop among them, so the civil work that this office tends to do includes divorce, child custody, landlord-tenant, and representing individuals against local governments.

The majority of law that is practiced by the advocacy center is criminal defense, which is part of the criminal justice system that is concerned with the punishment of those who commit crimes (misdemeanors and felonies).

There is no shortage of clients who need assistance in Northern Michigan; the office is currently working on active cases in 15 counties. In terms of variety of client type, there are court-appointed and retained clients. Locally, the office’s three attorneys are on the indigent defense contract for Benzie County’s 85th district court, and the number of court-appointed cases that the office has fluctuates throughout the year. In terms of retained clients, the practice includes both civil or criminal cases.

“We hold the government and its agents accountable. Particularly in criminal cases,

***Separate Editor’s Note:** VanDussen is the author’s life partner, thus Jenn Ryan is the second staffer and the fifth total member of the office.



Ruby, a sweet Jack Russell Terrier, will greet you at the aqua-painted Jesse L. Williams Law and Advocacy Center of Benzonia. Photo by Aubrey Ann Parker.

our job is to protect people’s rights,” Mas says. “We hold a magnifying glass to the actions of law enforcement, to ensure that no corners are cut in their rush to judgment. We have found that, the more heinous the alleged crime, the more willing the government is to disregard the law to convict.”

Dynamic Duo

Jesse L. Williams, J.D., was raised in

a working-class family here in Northern Michigan, and he graduated from Benzie Central High School in 1989. Williams went on to serve in the United States Army for eight years, including six months locating and clearing land mines and bunkers after the Gulf War.

After leaving military life, Williams returned to this area to attend Northwestern Michigan College for two semesters. Although he had not taken high school very seriously, he proved himself as a college student and transferred to Michigan State University for his undergraduate degree in organizational communication. After graduating, he ran a successful construction company here in Benzie County. Following that hard work for a couple of years, Williams jokes that he needed “student loans to surf,” so he decided to go to law school in San Diego, California, graduating from Thomas Jefferson School of Law in 2004.

After law school, Williams resettled in Northern Michigan and has been practicing here since 2006. Since making the investment and office move to Benzonia, Williams married his long-time partner Megan (Jeffs) Williams in 2013. Jeffs hails from Interlochen and graduated from Traverse City Central High School. When she is not nurturing the couple’s children and cooking wholesome, culinary wonders, she teaches Bikram hot yoga. They love the wide-open spaces found throughout Northern Michigan—whether

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With A Grateful Heart

Benzie groups give thanks

By Kelly Ottinger

Current Contributor

When English colonists built the Plymouth Colony in what is now the state of Massachusetts, the act of giving thanks was a part of daily life. But gratitude was expressed in daily prayer, rather than the once-yearly feast that we have come to recognize as the modern-day holiday.

That first feast was celebrated nearly 400 years ago, when the Pilgrims joined with the native Wampanoag to give thanks for a successful joint harvest. Some of today’s traditional dishes are reminiscent of fooda that these two groups may have shared—gourds, corn, greens, and wild game—it may not have been pumpkin pie and oyster stuffing, but the common ground between then and now really is not the food, it is the thanks.

In the 2018 version here in Benzie County, people still gather to give thanks for successful harvests. They gather individually, with family and friends, as church families and community entities working toward shared goals. Entire communities invite those living outside this area to share in festivals that celebrate cherry, grape and apple harvests, the salmon run, and the food and drink that is made possible by it all.

Appreciation for the bounty is but one aspect of today’s Thanksgiving holiday—the

holiday has also come to mean a couple of days off work, lengthy football games, corn hole with cousins, and perhaps tactfully pretending to not notice the idiosyncrasies of relatives whom are otherwise seen only once or twice each year.

Prayers are often said at family and community gatherings, and sometimes a quick round of “share one thing you’re thankful for” is required before the turkey is carved or the wine is poured.

But a deep dive into self-reflective gratitude is becoming rare. And that is too bad, because according to *Forbes Magazine*, a continual exercise of the gratitude muscle brings a plethora of positive effects. In fact, they identify seven scientifically measured impacts of feeling grateful on a regular basis. Gratitude:

1. Opens the door to more relationships
2. Improves physical health
3. Improves psychological health
4. Enhances empathy, while reducing aggression tendencies
5. Improves sleep
6. Improves self-esteem
7. Improves mental strength

Who—besides friends, significant others, and family members—helps to light the flame of gratitude within us? What about our area groups and agencies that are working to lift Benzie County residents in so many different ways?

Although Michigan’s geographically smallest county, Benzie is home to an astounding 187 non-profit organizations. These run the gamut from those we easily recognize on a day-to-day basis to each individual scout troop, professional league, church, and library. The combined assets of these groups tops \$57 million, and often their work is done so quietly that residents would only notice if they suddenly disappeared. As citizens, we are grateful to each and every group that sits down together and forms a plan to somehow make life here better.

True gratitude is not one-sided—when deeply felt, it creates a desire to return the favor, to give back. This is true not only for individuals, but our local non-profit organiza-



Steve Kelly (left) of Frankfort Pines Assisted Living senior care center recently donated a wheelchair to Jim, a Neighbor in need. Photo courtesy of Benzie Area Christian Neighbors (BACN).

tions, as well.

For the purpose of this article, we have asked a few of these groups to share something that they, as an organization, have been thankful for during 2018. And in the spirit of returning the favor, we have asked them to share what residents can do to help their missions, especially during this season of Thanksgiving and the upcoming holidays.

“We have so many things—truly daily—that we are grateful for, and it’s hard to share just one,” says Liz Ham, client services facilitator for Benzie Area

Christian Neighbors (BACN). “But one day recently, we had a Neighbor who was in a wheelchair and struggling with the chair. It just wasn’t in good condition, and you could see he was having trouble steering the chair. He told us that his insurance would not pay for another chair for three years. We put in a call to Jim Kelly of Frankfort Pines Assisted Living. Within 45 minutes, he brought a brand-new wheelchair to our Neighbor and

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Marcelo Betti: Immigration Attorney

Questions & Answers with community faces

There is a lot of rhetoric right now, on both sides of the political spectrum, about immigration policy in the United States. But how much does the average person who lives in Benzie County really know about what is real and what is #fakenews? In an effort to better inform our readers, *The Betsie Current* decided to ask an expert—having been born in Sao Paulo, Brazil, but college-educated in Michigan and Vermont, 34-year-old Marcelo Betti is both an immigrant and an immigration attorney.

Betti grew up in Sao Paulo, one of the biggest cities in the world. He first came to rural Northern Michigan at the age of 16 as an exchange student at Traverse City Central High School for a full year. After going back to finish school in Brazil, Betti returned to Traverse City to attend Northwestern Michigan College, followed by Grand Valley State University through NMC’s University Center, graduating in 2008 with a Bachelor’s degree in Liberal Studies.

Meanwhile, in 2007, Betti met Norika Kida, a native of Benzie County, who graduated in 2007 with a Bachelor of Arts degree in Human Development and Social Relations from Kalamazoo College. After undergrad, the couple moved to Benzie County, where they worked as AmeriCorps VISTA volunteers at the Michigan State University Extension office in Beulah; they participated in the creation and early development of Grow Benzie, helping to bring together community resources to get that nonprofit organization off the ground. Additionally, they organized after-school programs for at-risk youth at Betsie Valley, Crystal Lake, and Platte River elementary schools.

In 2010, Betti and Kida enrolled at Vermont Law School, and they married in 2012. The couple came back to Northern Michigan after graduating from law school in 2013 and have been here ever since—they bought a house in Traverse City in 2014, and they now have a two-year-old son, Lorenzo.

From 2013 to 2017, Betti worked at Rosi & Gardner, P.C., a Traverse City law firm, where he practiced primarily family law and immigration law. In 2015, he also began working part-time at Justice For Our Neighbors - Michigan (JFON-MI), a nonprofit organization that offers free, high-quality immigration legal services to low-income individuals; he left Rosi & Gardner when his JFON position became full-time in the summer of 2018.

Continuing with our interview series on impactful local characters, *The Betsie Current* caught up with Betti between legal research projects.

THE BETSIE CURRENT: Can you tell us a bit about yourself, your background, and how you landed in Northern Michigan? What drew you to this area? Did you always know that you wanted to be a lawyer?

MARCELLO BETTI: I initially landed in Northern Michigan by pure coincidence—I signed up to be an exchange student in the United States, but I had no choice over where

I would end up. I was lucky to be assigned to Traverse City, a place that I had never heard of but which quickly became “home.” I grew up in a big city, where everyone lived in fenced-in apartment buildings; there was no sense of community. Arriving in Northern Michigan, I was shocked by how warm and friendly most people were. After a few months living here, I realized that this is where I wanted to live, rather than going back to the “concrete jungle” of Sao Paulo. As for my career choice, I was not one of those people who knew from an early age what I wanted to be; it wasn’t until college when I set my sights on law school. For better or worse, I am one of those people who got a law degree “to help people.” I also wanted a career that would allow me to come



Having been born in Brazil but college educated in Michigan and Vermont, Marcelo Betti, J.D., is both an immigrant and an immigration attorney. Photo courtesy of JFONMI.org.

back and settle in Northern Michigan, and being an attorney seemed like a viable option.

CURRENT: What has you most excited about practicing law in Northern Michigan?

BETTI: Since I started practicing law five years ago, my favorite practice area has been immigration law. I am fortunate and glad to now be working full-time as an immigration attorney for JFON-MI, a nonprofit that offers free legal services and is a safe haven for all immigrants, regardless of race or religion. We have four offices throughout Michigan, but the office where I work is located at the Central United Methodist Church in downtown Traverse City, and we have served clients throughout Northern Michigan, even including some from the Upper Peninsula. We also organize “traveling clinics” a few times a year, so that we can reach out to other Northern Michigan communities and offer our legal services to clients who have heard about us but may not otherwise be able to travel to Traverse City. This year alone, we have already held legal clinics in Benzie, Leelanau, and Emmet counties, in addition to our usual monthly clinics in Traverse City. We usually hold an immigration clinic in Benzie County at least once a year, at the St. Andrews Presbyterian Church, at the top of the hill between Honor and Beulah. For 2018, this clinic was in September, and we helped five clients from the Benzie/Manistee area that day. Also, we will be giving a presentation at the St. Philip’s Church of Beulah on Thursday, November 15, at 6:30 p.m. on the topic of immigration.

CURRENT: About how many clients do you juggle at one time? How many total cases in a year? What kinds of cases do you work on?

BETTI: I am the only attorney in our Traverse City office, and we usually have between 40 to 80 open client files at any given time; just

this year, we have already helped more than 75 clients, everything from one-time legal counseling consultations to full-fledged representation. Immigration cases vary greatly in terms of complexity and length, timewise. For example, helping a green card holder to apply for U.S. citizenship can be a straightforward process and may take only six months or so. On the other side of the spectrum, helping an undocumented person who was a victim of domestic violence to apply for a U visa—based on his or her cooperation with law enforcement authorities in the investigation and prosecution of that crime—may take 60-plus hours just to compile and submit the application, and then another four or five years for the government

to process it. Every client situation is unique. Generally speaking, our organization helps individuals with family-based and humanitarian immigration matters. Types of cases that we work on include applications for permanent residence, AKA the “green card,” or immigrant visas that are based on marriage or other family relationship with a U.S. citizen; work-permit renewals for “deferred action for childhood arrivals,” commonly known as “DACA,” recipients; applications for asylum; special immigrant juvenile status for minor children who are present in the U.S. without one or both parents; U visas for victims of qualifying criminal activity; T visas for victims of human trafficking; and more. There are also times when there is nothing that we can do to help “fix” a client’s immigration problem. In those cases, breaking “bad news” to the client is itself a valuable service, because it makes the client less vulnerable to false promises by an unscrupulous lawyer or “notario.”

CURRENT: Are you taking new clients?

BETTI: Yes, we are always taking on new clients. When a potential client calls, we schedule them to an appointment, usually at one of our monthly clinics. On that day, the client will typically meet first with a volunteer, who conducts a thorough intake, and then with me for preliminary legal advice. If the client’s matter is something that our organization can help with, the client signs a representation agreement, and we schedule a follow-up consultation and go from there. Unfortunately, there will be times when we must turn down a client’s case, because we don’t have the capacity to handle it, because we are already overwhelmed with our other open cases. But that has been happening less and less since I started working there full time last summer.

CURRENT: How have you seen your work grow and change since you began? And how do you hope it will continue to grow and change?

BETTI: I actually started working with JFON-MI on a part-time basis three years ago, in 2015. Since then, our country’s immigration policy has changed dramatically—not only do we see more clients seeking our services, but also the type of help that people are seeking has changed. The best examples are the calls that we now get regarding individuals who have been detained by immigration authorities. During the Obama administration, ICE [Immigration and Customs Enforcement] focused on the detention and removal of individuals who had a criminal record. The Trump administration has moved away from that and is detaining individuals indiscriminately. The increased number of detentions has changed our work, as we now must help clients to ask the immigration judge to allow them to post bond and seek other immigration relief, including the cancellation

of their removal/deportation proceedings. While I am proud that our organization can offer those services, I hope that the need for them will decrease; it is painful to watch how much families suffer (including U.S.-citizen spouses and children) when a family’s main breadwinner is suddenly detained. I do hope that our organization can continue to expand our service area. We are the only office north of Grand Rapids that offers free immigration legal services, yet there are many folks in, say, Alpena, Gaylord, and the Upper Peninsula who could benefit from our services but still don’t know about us.

CURRENT: Anything in particular that you would like to share about your law practice or philosophy?What is the best or most rewarding part of your job?

BETTI: I try really hard to listen and to not make assumptions about a client’s case. It is common for us to get a call from a client who believes they have a particular issue or goal, but then it turns out that they have completely different problems—or solutions!—to their situation. Which makes sense: immigration law is complex and convoluted, so it becomes the attorney’s job to listen to the client’s description of his/her situation, ask follow-up questions, and then, and only then, determine the client’s options. The most rewarding part of my job is to learn that the government has approved a client’s case, and to see the relief that brings to clients and their families.

CURRENT: What do you have to say to people who are reading this and thinking, ‘Wow, what important work! I want to help. I wonder what I could do?’

BETTI: As with most nonprofits organizations, our most pressing need is financial support. From time to time, we also have a need for Spanish-speaking volunteers, for interpreting during a clinic or for translating documents. By helping our organization, volunteers are also helping their community—when we help an individual to obtain a work permit or other form of immigration relief, that allows them to become part of our mainstream economy. Everyone wins.

CURRENT: Speaking of the Northern Michigan economy, what could our area do to attract more talented young people to this area?

BETTI: I think there is a substantial pay gap between Northern Michigan jobs versus comparable jobs in bigger cities. This is a particular challenge once you factor in the cost of living in a place like Traverse City, which is quite high for rural America, and the student loan burden that many—if not most—college graduates now carry. While it is a beautiful and safe place to live and raise a family, Northern Michigan is not an easy place for young people to make ends meet. Perhaps we will see more employers offering perks associated with flexible work schedules, daycare for young children, or even assistance with student loan repayment; the kinds of things that may encourage a young professional to stay in the area, despite the

lower base pay.

CURRENT: What else does Northern Michigan need? What are your hopes for this area for the future?

BETTI: Improved transportation systems are a must. We have already seen a great leap in that regard over the past decade, with the Benzie Bus and an expansion of BATA routes out of Traverse City [to neighboring communities]. But it goes beyond that—having railway connections to other parts of the state and cheaper airfare out of Traverse City would also add to our economy and quality of living. As charming as Northern Michigan is, there is an obvious downside to being geographically isolated from the rest of the world, especially when you do what I do, and the nearest immigration court is in Detroit!

CURRENT: What are the biggest challenges and rewards of working and living in Northern Michigan?

BETTI: As I mentioned, geographical isolation and relatively lower pay are a couple of challenges. On the flipside, Northern Michigan is a very supportive community, including of the work that we do at JFON-MI. Perhaps because we live in an agricultural area, it is easier for folks to see the contributions that immigrants make to our local economy, which is why we see support for our work from all over the political spectrum.

CURRENT: With the busy life of a lawyer, what other things are you involved with/able to squeeze in?

BETTI: I try to play soccer as often as possible; this past summer, I played in two separate leagues in Traverse City.

CURRENT: What are your favorite local events and activities? Any favorite dining, recreation, hiking spots? What’s your ideal autumn day look like? How would you spend it?

BETTI: My wife has family in Benzie, so we try to make it out there as much as possible, since Benzie beaches are far, far superior to their Traverse City counterparts. I love to cook, so when in Benzie, I always try to visit the Market Basket and walk out with a box full of produce.

If you have questions or need help with immigration legal issues, you can reach the Justice For Our Neighbors office in Traverse City at 231-620-1100. Consultations are by appointment only; no walk-ins. JFON-MI offers services in English, Spanish, or Portuguese. Learn more at JFONMI.org online.

Interested in learning more about the complicated immigration system in the United States? St. Philip’s Episcopal Church of Beulah is hosting the second part of a two-part conversation on this topic on Thursday, November 15, at 6:30 p.m. (The first part was a legal introduction to immigration, presented by Sarah Yore-VanOosterhout of Lighthouse Immigrant Advocates in Holland, Michigan.) You do not have to have attended the first part to get something out of the second part, which will have a panel discussion with a particular focus on Benzie County. All are invited to this special meeting of humans desiring to learn how to better care for and love our neighbors.



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CALENDAR OF EVENTS

CONSTANTLY FLOWING

Mondays
Circle Time for infants and toddlers at the Benzie Shores District Library at 630 Main Street in Frankfort. Infants and toddlers (+ their parents/caregivers) will have fun rhyming and moving with Miss Char, as well as a focus on repetition. Each week, children build their repertoire of rhymes, both old and new. There is an informal playgroup following Circle Time. 10-11am.

Pilates with Anna at the Oliver Art Center in downtown Frankfort. annamallien@gmail.com 10-11am.

Free yoga class for seniors with Michelle Leines at The Gathering Place Senior Center. 10579 Main Street in the Honor Plaza. 231-525-0600. 10-11am.

Mending Time: a volunteer will be at the Benzie Shores District Library to repair clothing while you wait. If you have a tear in your shirt, your child has a rip in her jeans, or the hem has unraveled from your tablecloth, bring your items to the library during “Mending Time.” No formal wear or upholstery. No drop-offs. 10:30am-12pm.

Cards at The Gathering Place. We have a dedicated group of card sharks who play Pinochle weekly during lunch, but we aren’t limited to Pinochle: grab your friends and join us for euchre, cribbage, and rummy, too! 12-1pm.

MIFiberShed at Grow Benzie is a place for fabric, fiber craft, and clothing to be recycled, remade, or exchanged. Clear out your closet or sewing/craft room and get inspired to make new stuff. We give fiber nine lives before the landfill. Come use a sewing machine, help to sort donations, and acquire clothing for \$1 per pound! Donations give you fibercredit to use in the shop. Workshops on the 2nd Monday of the month. MIFiberShed is open every Monday 12-7pm. Call/text Emily Votruba at 231-399-0098 or email emilylvotruba@yahoo.com to join the email list.

Zumba with Suzanne at The Gathering Place. All welcome. \$3 per class. 2:30pm.

Tuesdays
Sunrise Rotary Club’s weekly meetings are over breakfast at the Cold Creek Inn of Beulah. Come join us! 7:30-9am.

Music by the Melody Makers at The Gathering Place. 10:30am-1:30pm.

Knitting Group at Benzonía Public Library. A “knit-along” project for those who want to work on the same project, or bring your own project if you prefer; we’d love your company! Need help? If you are having troubles with a current project, bring it along and we’ll help you get it straightened out. Call Michele at 231-383-5716 with any questions. 1-3pm.

Chair Yoga for \$5 at The Gathering Place. 3:30-4:30pm.

Taco Tuesdays at the Roadhouse Mexican Bar & Grille in Benzonía. Only \$1.89 each! 4-9pm.

Game Night at the Dary Library. 5-7pm.

Zumba for \$3 at The Gathering Place. 5:15pm.

Yoga with Kari at Pleasant Valley Community Center

of Arcadia. Open to all levels; \$13 per session. 231-383-1883. 5:30-7pm.

Wednesdays
Zumba for \$3 at The Gathering Place. All welcome. \$3 per class. 8:30m.

Stay Fit with Doris at The Gathering Place. 10-11am.

Open studio at the Oliver Art Center. Participants are strongly encouraged to become members and to contribute a donation of \$2 per visit. 10am-4pm.

Bingo at The Gathering Place. Cost is \$1 per card or bring a prize. 12:30-1:30pm.

PLARN at The Gathering Place. Crochet plastic mats to donate for the homeless. For more info, call Dawn at 231-525-0601. 1:15pm.

Thursdays
Arcadia Brach Library hosts sewing school basics at the Pleasant Valley Community Center. 231-889-4230.
Bible Study at The Gathering Place. 10-11am.

Pre-school Story Time with Miss Désirée: Enjoy exciting stories, followed by a fun craft. A time to socialize, make new friends, and hear great stories. Benzonía Public Library.

Bunco at The Gathering Place. 1-2pm.

Computers with Carol at the Darcy Library at 7238 Commercial Street in Beulah. Ask computer-related questions. Read to dogs Chaz and Denny! 1-5pm.

Everyone is welcome to attend Open Clay Studio at the Oliver Art Center, including families! Per 4-visit block (12 hours total, used how you like), \$60 fees cover one adult or one adult/child pair. It can be as fun/focused as you prefer, and all skill levels should consider taking part. Children must be accompanied by an adult at all times in the studio. Price includes: 25 pounds of clay, glaze, and firings. 3:30-6:30pm.

Yoga with Kari at the Ware Farm. Open to all levels; \$13 per session. 231-383-1883. 4-5:30pm.

Game Night at the Darcy Library. 5-7pm.

Mending Time: a volunteer will repair clothing while you wait at Benzie Shores District Library. 5-6pm.

Knitting for NICUs: Ashley Taillard leads a knitting guild, which is fulfilling the clothing needs of the neonatal intensive care units (NICUs) of Northern Michigan hospitals. Children’s activities are available during this time, so that parents do not need to find childcare. Bring your own knitting supplies or purchase a starter kit on site. Free lessons will be offered for those who do not know how to knit. The guild meets at the Crystal Cafe at 1681 Benzie Highway/US-31, in the Shop’nSave plaza. 5:30pm.

Open Mic Night at St. Ambrose Cellars. 6-9pm.

Open Mic at The Cabbage Shed in Elberta. 8pm.

Fridays
Bngo, music and lunch in Thompsonville with the Benzie Senior Resources. 10:30am-1p.m.

Tech Support to help you navigate the tech world. Please call in advance to schedule your appointment with Robert. The Gathering Place. 1-2pm.

Wii Bowling at The Gathering Place. 1-2pm.



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Saturdays
MIFiberShed at Grow Benzie is open 9am-4pm.

Earthy Afternoons and Nature Nightrs with Amalia Fernand of Nature Explorers International: art, games, scavenger hunts, nature walks, and itneactions with program animals at our indoor and outdoor classroom at 6962 Burr Street in Benzonia. \$12 per class. 3:30-5:30pm and 6-9pm.

Sundays
Storm The Mic: Open mic at Stormcloud Brewing Company in Frankfort, hosted by Blake Elliott.

*Yoga classes at Discover YOU Yoga and Fitness in Frankfort every day of the week, except Saturday. For a complete schedule and more information on classes and rates, visit [discoveryogami.com](#).

ON DECK

Friday, November 2
Barefoot plays a variety of songs from various artists, spanning decads of popular music, but they also do their own style. Jenni Rae on vocals; Nathon Lane on acoustic guitar; Phil Coryell on lead harmonicas; and Bee Jay Reffitt on stand-up bass. St. Ambrose Cellars. 6-9pm.

Friday-Saturday, November 2-3
Benzie Central High School theater performs “Almost, Maine,” comprised of nine short vignettes that explore love and loss in a remote, mythical almost-town called Almost, Maine. \$12 for adults; \$5 for students. Shows begin at 7:30pm.

Saturday, November 3
Multi-PDS - Know Thyself, from PSIA-C: This event is open to members and non-members. Movement Analysis is commonly approached subject among ski instructors, and demonstrations are a vital part of the teaching cycle. So how can an instructor ensure that the image they are providing matches the one in their mind’s eye? Learn at this clinic at Crystal Mountain Resort. 9am-3:30pm.

Saturday, November 3
Biochar Workshop at Grow Benzie: learn about the amazing soil amendment that anyone can produce for their gardening, lawn, or pasture needs. \$5 per adult; please pre-register via 231-882-4391 or email [aime@benziecd.org](#). 10am-12pm.

Saturday, November 3
Community Yoga & Open House: join the studio’s teachers for a day of yoga and discover what’s on the calendar for the rest of autumn, winter, and early spring. Come for a class or come for the day. Suggested donation of \$5 per class or \$15 for all day. RSVP via [jessayogini@gmail.com](#) or text 231-620-3529. Discover YOU Yoga & Fitness at 1554 Elm Road, just outside Frankfort. 45-minute classes begin at 10am and run through 4pm.

Saturday, November 3
The Feral Cats perform at St. Ambrose. 6-9pm.

Saturday, November 3
G*Snacks keep it fun and funky at Iron Fish Distillery. 7-9pm.

Saturday, November 3
Born in Ann Arbor, Michigan, Blake Elliott took both sets of her parents’ last names to create her stage moniker. Raised with a piano- and guitar-playing mother and an Interlochen-trained percussionist father, Blake was around music her whole life. Inspired by the beauty of her home state and this big adventure called “life,” she writes songs that

tell stories of love and heartbreak, dive bars, good whiskey, and everything that can come from them. Stormcloud Brewing Company. 8-10pm.

Sunday, November 4
Fall Back: Daylight Savings Time ends!

Monday, November 5
“The Leisure Seeker” movie at the Darcy Library. 6:30-8:30pm.

Tuesday, November 6
VOTE VOTE VOTE VOTE VOTE VOTE VOTE.

Tuesday, November 6
Dine Out For BACN: Stormcloud will donate 10% of sales to Benzie Area Christian Neighbors between 5-10pm.

Tuesday, November 6
Singer, songwriter, and all-around good citizen Andre Villoch performs with special Zack Light at Lake Ann Brewing Company. 6:30-9:30pm. (Also, this is LABC’s owner’s birthday week, and Matt is asking that people donate food and/or monetary donations for the Lake Ann united Methodist Chruc’s food pantry. You can drop off donations all week at the brewery, and visit on Saturday, November 11, when they will donate 20% of all sales.)

Wednesday, November 7
King Tut Tomb Discovery: join historyteller Maureen Esther for this wonderful presentation which covers the tomb discovery, excavation, and disposition of the most important archeological find to date. Includes a discussion of Egyptian culture at the time of the Pharaohs. Maureen has been a historyteller for 27 years in the Detroit area and is looking forward to bringing her love of art and history to the Benzonia Public Library. Refreshments provided. No charge for event, just come and enjoy! 7-9pm.

Thursday, November 8
Stormcloud Beer Dinner at Bradley’s Pub & Grille in Interlochen: the kitchen will pair four Belgian-inspired beers with four of their culinary creations. \$50 per person. Seating is limited. Reserve your seat by callings 231-276-6401. 6:30-8:30pm.

Friday, November 9
Family Game Night at the Benzie Shores District Library: popcorna nd board games for the whole family, all ages welcome, board games provided. 6-8pm.

Friday, November 9
Akex Mendenall performs at St. Ambrose. 6-9pm.

Friday-Saturday, November 9-10
Holiday book and craft sale at Benzonia Public Library: enjoy refreshments while shopping our selection of gently used books and puzzles, plus whimsical crafts by the repuproseful librarians. BPL members get one free book! 10am-5pm.

Saturday, November 10
The B Side Growlers are coming to dance the night away at St. Ambrose Cellars. 6-9pm.

Saturday, November 10
The Real Ingredients perform at Stormcloud Brewing Company. 8-10pm.

Thursday, November 15
Interested in learning more about the complicated immigration system in the United States? Come to a panel discussion with a particular focus on Benzie County. All are invited to this special meeting of humans desiring to learn how to better care for and love our neighbors. St. Philip’s Episcopal Church of Beulah. 6:30pm.



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The Betsie Current

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Law

Continued from page 1

dirt or mountain biking, hiking, walking the beaches, paddle boarding the rivers and lakes, or playing in an open field with one of their children, the couple finds solace here in the north.

When it comes to his work, Jesse Williams has garnered a reputation as a “man of the people” who fights relentlessly for his clients. A combination of work ethic and an unwillingness to accept the status quo of the criminal justice system has driven the trajectory of Williams’s practice.

“There are overwhelming injustices throughout the world,” he says. “This job allows me to help people combat some of them. The process is both inspirational and defeating.”

But Williams does not consider defeat to be measured in case “wins” and “losses,” but rather he is talking about the fatigue of fighting a system that he feels is often rigged.

Williams is not afraid to challenge the authority of that system, having come up against many an obstacle throughout his career. Although he might prefer a career in professional snowboarding, mountain biking, or other adventure sports, he sticks with criminal defense.

“The criminal defense attorney is the only shield available to Americans in the face of governmental assault,” he explains. “It takes a team of amazing people and a tremendous amount of energy to overcome the challenges that this job brings. I like the challenge.”

In late 2010, after a local murder case resolved, Williams deepened his bench by adding local activist, writer, and self-appointed accountability aficionado Eric L. VanDussen to his team. Criminal defense is no cup of tea, but it could not be a better fit for Williams and VanDussen.

VanDussen attended Benzie Central High School but graduated with a GED after being expelled from high school in 1993. (He should have graduated with Benzie’s Class of 1994.) Emancipating himself from his family at the young age of 14, VanDussen has studied the law for decades for one reason or another—whether it was to get himself out of a situation that he found himself in or to hold to account those whom he believed were doing wrong.

Over the years, VanDussen attended some college, never graduating with a degree, and enjoyed assorted jobs and travel across the country, eventually landing back in Northern Michigan, where he worked construction for years, while also dabbling in community accountability advocacy and freelance journalism.

VanDussen is a self-taught legal mind who has defended himself in court many times over the years, most often to shine a light on a governmental agency’s practices. VanDussen’s work at the Law and Advocacy Center includes legal research, writing, and the management of a busy criminal defense office, as well as property and facility oversight, construction, and upkeep for the commercial space. VanDussen is also currently on the board of directors of the Benzie Bus and serves as the chair of the Benzie County Building Authority. Additionally, he is very passionate about Elberta beach and has been actively involved in protests of the closing of Lakeshore Boulevard; he has administrated the Occupy Elberta Beach Facebook page since 2012.

“Governmental bodies do not function properly unless the citizenry compels them to be open and transparent,” VanDussen says.

Certainly an unconventional location for a law office, Williams and VanDussen decided to plant their commercial roots in Benzonia, instead of commuting to Traverse City.

Affordable, easy to locate, close to home; all have contributed to the “why” of the Benzonia location. Moreover, Benzonia provides proximity to the lakes, rivers, and trails that the entire team love—whether running, hiking, cycling, or just exploring the beauty of our area, each staffer finds solace in nature to cope with the difficulties that the work they do can often incur.

Adding A Partnership to the Partnership

At some point in 2014, VanDussen met Frederick F. Stig-Nielsen, J.D., through mutual friends and, after a few good conversations, introduced him to Williams. Stig-Nielsen and his wife, Mary E. “Betsy” Mas, J.D., were both vibrant, young law school graduates with plans to stay in Benzie County, perhaps joining the local indigent defense contracts in Benzie and Manistee counties to begin “getting their feet wet,” legally speaking.

Stig-Nielsen hails from Denmark originally, but he moved to the United States at age 12 and graduated from high school in 2004 in Kentucky, so his English reveals a southern twang. He did is undergraduate studies in creative writing at the University of Montana at Missoula, graduating in 2009. Mas, meantime, is of Chilean-American lineage, having grown up in Rockford, Michigan and having completed an undergraduate degree in communications and Spanish at Aquinas College in 2007.

The pair met at PDX, the Portland airport. They both attended law school at Lewis & Clark College in Portland, Oregon; Mas graduated in 2012, Stig-Nielsen in 2013, and the two married in 2012, with the intention to join the Peace Corps to help change the world, one day at a time.

While in the application process, they moved to Elberta briefly in May 2013 (her mother was already living in Benzie County, thus why they came here), leaving in March 2014 for a brief stint in the Peace Corps, stationed in Jamaica. After living in Elberta for 10 months and working jobs at The May Farm, The Cabbage Shed, and Cru Cellars between the two of them, the couple departed for rural Jamaica in March 2014 to begin a 27-month stint with the Peace Corps.

But things did not work out. The free-spirited, politically passionate advocates say that they clashed with the hierarchical, corporate structure of the Peace Corps—they felt that their hands were tied working for the U.S. government and that there was not enough room for growth.

So, they returned to Elberta to once again embrace this community’s free spirit, and they continue to travel the state, country, and world multiple times every year to visit friends and family in far-flung places, as well as exploring new locations together.

Starting out as a trial relationship to see if it would be a good fit philosophically and lifestyle-wise, Stig-Nielsen began working with Williams and VanDussen after he was sworn-in in January 2015 (Williams motioned for him). Later, after Mas joined the firm (and when I began working full-time at the office), the “Jesse L. Williams Law & Advocacy Center” came to fruition.

Why Criminal Defense?

“I like to think of myself as a musician who moonlights as an attorney,” says Stig-Nielsen, who sings, plays guitar, owns a mandolin, and spends time experimenting with and studying music of all kinds. For the past few years, he and some friends have played many gigs as a three- or four-piece band called “Alfredo.” He loves to dabble in everything from extreme sports to fishing and hunting, culinary finery to bread baking, running, and more. (For instance, just two months ago, he took first in his age group and sixth overall at the Big Sur Marathon in mid-September.)

As a snowboard bum with an undergrad degree in creative writing, Stig-Nielsen says that he essentially scared himself into law school when he realized that professional snowboarding or *The New York Times* best seller list might not happen, and something had to give—a born devil’s advocate, arguing his way across the globe, he was told time and again that he would be a “great lawyer.”

“Now, I’m a lawyer” he says with a slight smile. “Time to start working on the ‘great’ part.”

Still in the early part of his law career, Stig-Nielsen says: “There is no limit to the quality of work you can produce in the practice of law. It’s like any other highly specialized skill, whether technical, artistic, or athletic. It’s linguistic judo, and it requires lots of focus, discipline, and self-control. There is always room for improvement, and there are always nuances to be discovered and embraced.”

Stig-Nielsen says that he pursued criminal defense because he does not believe that justice is synonymous with revenge.

“Our criminal justice system is set up to punish, punish, punish,” he explains. “Uncle Sam takes the bad kids out to the tool shed and beats the piss out of them. And for what? The violence that is meted out against those who don’t follow the law is in the form of incarceration, which dehumanizes and degrades people. They are treated like animals—no wonder they sometimes continue to act like animals when they come out on the other end. Why should we respect a system of laws that does that? Especially when those ‘enforcing’ the law oftentimes disregard many other laws in the process. In my opinion, humans are at their worst when they believe they are righteous and guided by an overbearing, ‘higher’ morality.”

Meanwhile, Mas is an organic garden-tending endurance athlete and yogi, as well as a voracious reader and researcher. She finds herself deeply

satisfied when immersed in challenging research, writing, and analysis; for the past year at the office, she and VanDussen have been collaborating research that pertains to jail suicide.

Mas has built a strong reputation of defending her clients with her deep compassion and realistic perspective. A feminist-minded, empathetic woman, she strives to help her clients out of the matter at hand, and to instill in them a sense of purpose and perspective.

Mas pursued law for a variety of reasons—including parental persuasion and her overall temperament. Criminal defense was a natural niche, she says, as a self-described “bleeding heart” who joined Save The Whales while in elementary school.

She has always been drawn to the disenfranchised. Although she is not religious, her undergraduate work was done at Aquinas College, a catholic institution which focused on “service learning.” There, she learned about liberation theology, the most impactful take-away being Marxism. On two different occasions while studying at Aquinas, Mas visited Honduras; once, she met a Jesuit priest whose life mission was to get young people out of gangs.

“He lived in one of the most dangerous places in Central America,” Mas says. “He was a badass. He was grassroots. I was inspired to choose a career that would allow me to work ‘on the ground’ for marginalized populations. Becoming a lawyer has allowed me to do both.”

Shortly after law school, Mas remembers working on a murder case with a defense attorney in Washington, before the move to Michigan.

“It was a brutal, gory case,” she says. “There was no question that our client had committed the murder [not the issue being tried], but the issue was whether or not the murder was premeditated. I remember talking to our client and still being able to see his humanity. He was a person who had done a horrific thing, but he was still a human being, with a family and a history and life experiences that led him to that point. It was eerie—feeling compassion for a murderer—but I did, and I still find that compassion in my heart today.”

Continuing a career in criminal defense for Mas is simple.

“Si quiere la paz, trabaja por la justicia,” Mas says. “That translates to: if you want peace, work for justice.”

But practicing criminal defense can take a toll. Staying fit, spending time outside, making—or listening to—music, traveling, and continuing to evolve as an individual and as an attorney are how the Benzonía-based attorneys and the office staff find a way to keep their heads and hearts afloat.

“It took me a while to come around to it, but now I actually get inspired daily,” Stig-Nielsen says. “For better or worse, this is where I have landed, so I may as well do everything I can to be as good as I can be.”

Contact the Jesse L. Williams Law and Advocacy Center in Benzonía for a free consultation via phone at 231-649-8340 or email jlwdefense@gmail.com.

Current Contributor Jenn Ryan is the author of this article. She has been working full time for Williams and the team since the autumn of 2015. Ryan graduated from Benzie Central High School in 1992I, then attended Alma College, graduating in 1996 with a Bachelor of Arts degree in English with emphasis in sociology and women’s studies. With an extensive background in writing, project management, volunteering, service, and as an empath, Ryan finds the Law and Advocacy Center to be a great fit—what started out as an administrative role has evolved into an integral support roleI, in which she tries to make the day-to-day work of the law practice both sustainable and meaningful. She focuses on relationship-building with everyone, whether clients, court staff, other attorneys, or the community.

“The truth is I try to bring a little love to the table,” Ryan says. “Often, people are dealing with stressful situations, mistakes, and fear. When possible, I try to remind folks to find their breath.”

Ryan also serves on the Isaac Julian Legacy Foundation board of directors, as a Grow Benzie advisory member, and on the Frankfort 48-hour Film Festival committee. She also teaches yoga at Frankfort’s Discover YOU Yoga and Fitness, owned by her sister Jessica Ryan, and she books music for St. Ambrose Cellars.(Phase Two of the building renovation is still in the works and may include creative spaces; stay tuned.)

Thanks

Continued from page 1

told us to please call him if we had other needs like this. The Neighbor was so grateful; he just lit up, and you could see how this made his day. This is something that I’ll never forget.”

Meanwhile, BACN will be giving out approximately 200 turkeys this Thanksgiving to registered Neighbors who visit the food pantry—first come, first serve—beginning the week of November 12. Additionally, BACN welcomes gifts of turkeys, whole chickens, or hams, especially during the holiday season; one more item that would be really appreciated is new blankets.

For more information, call BACN at 231-882-9544.

“A brand new, soft, and warm blanket is such a treat for people,” Ham says. “It’s luxury they just can’t buy for themselves, and it also helps them keep the heat bills down!”

“What am I grateful for? So much,” says Dinah Haag, director of Benzie County Community Chorus. “Those choristers who are able are there glad-heartedly doing what needs to be done, whether moving an entire summer ‘set’ or risers from storage to a church, to the next church, and then back to storage. There are those who arrive early to rehearsals to set up chairs, without even being asked.”

What can the community do to support the Chorus during the upcoming holiday season?

“Give the gift of an experience, rather than a material item,” Haag says. “Come to one of our holiday concerts!”

This year’s holiday concerts—free of charge as a gift to the community, though a free-will offering will be taken to offset expenses—are Friday, December 7, at 7:30 p.m. and Saturday, December 8, at 3 p.m., both at the Frankfort United Methodist Church; and also Sunday, December 9, at 7:30 p.m. at St. Andrews Presbyterian Church of Beulah.

Dawn Bousamra, coordinator for Benzie Senior Resources, shares some of the things her organization is most grateful for: “We’re extremely thankful for the dedicated volunteers who deliver meals to our home-bound seniors. And we’re also very grateful to those who stock our loan closet; we have equipment—such as walkers, raised commodes, and shower chairs—thanks to them.”

For holiday help, Bousamra says that many of their clients are home-bound, so special gift bags are being assembled to deliver, with each containing things such as cheese and crackers, protein bars, lotion, lip balm, and fleece lap blankets. The goal is 200 bags.

Donations of any of these items can be dropped off by December 10 at either at The Gathering Place senior center at 10579 Main Street, in the Honor Plaza or at the Benzie Senior Resources administrative office at 10542 Main Street, just across the street.. For more information, call 231-525-0601.

“One more thing,” she adds. “Please consider visiting an elderly neighbor. Play a game of cards with them or take them to the store. Shovel their walk. Bring them a treat, or just take 10 minutes to chat—it can make all the difference in their holiday.”

For Community Cats of Benzie County, Carol McKee, co-founder of the non-profit organization and a veterinarian, says that she is so thankful for the “colony caregivers” who provide shelter, food, and water for the cats who have to endure freezing temperatures during Northern Michigan winters.

And, of course, thanks to our adopters, who give loving, forever homes to our kittens,” she adds. “It’s wonderful when they get to know the warmth and safety of an indoor home.”

Carol explains that the need continues.

“We are always in need of barns to relocate some of our feral cats [from their colonies],” she says. “They make great mousers and keep the rodent population out of your grain supplies. We require that those providing space for these cats also provide food, water, and shelter, and keep an eye out for health needs. We provide a neutered, vaccinated cat, for which there is no charge.”

For more information, call 231-383-3639.

For her gratitude highlight, Mercedes Michalowski, the executive director of the Elizabeth Lane Center for the Arts in downtown Frankfort, says: “In the entryway we have a ‘wish list’ board. A couple who had never been to the center toured

the galleries, visited the gift shop, and left. They returned a little while later with two items from the wish list—they had gone down the street to the hardware store to purchase them. They said they were so surprised by the OAC and wanted to give back in a small but meaningful way. We were so touched by that!”

How can the community help?

“This year, we will again have our Christmas Community Open House, featuring family-friendly activities, crafts, and visits from Santa and Mrs. Claus,” Michalowski says. “There are a variety of ways to help, and we’d love if people would call to see where they can step in!”

To learn more about the Open House opportunities, call the OAC at 231-352-4151.

At Grow Benzie, Josh Stoltz, the nonprofit’s executive director, is exuberant.

“Oh boy, I’m so blessed to be surrounded by brilliant people at Grow Benzie,” he says. “Our staff and volunteers find their way to us because of their passion and commitment to community. Take for instance Emily Votruba, a super-volunteer by any measure. She is here two full days a week, sorting and upcycling fabric in the MiFiberShed and MakerSpace. People come to make all sorts of things and support causes like Days for Girls, just because of her awesomeness.”

What are Grow Benzie’s immediate needs?

“We will begin our fifth year of after-school programming in November, and we’d love to have folks come and share their special skills with our area youth,” Stoltz says. “We’ll also be starting a weekly potluck series in January and could use help with greeting folks at the door. Give us a call to chat about these opportunities!”

Contact Grow Benzie at 231-882-9510.

At Joy 2 Ride Benzie, a newer nonprofit, executive director Carol Kraak says: “Of course, we’re so grateful to our volunteers who spend so much time learning so people can enjoy the rides. And for those who have so generously supported us through donations and grants, allowing us to purchase that first bike. But the rides—wow, they have been amazing! We’re so grateful to get to see people have this experience, and to hear their exclamations of joy to be able to ride bikes together!”

How can folks help other people to experience this joy? Perhaps frame a photo of a loved one enjoying the bike ride, as a keepsake of their experience.

“We can always use volunteer time,” Kraak says. ”Maintenance of equipment, and learning to assist with rides. There are many ways to help, and we welcome folks to contact us directly to see where they might fit in with this mission.”

Call or text 231-651-0434 for more information.

Last but not least, Papa J’s hosts an annual free dinner on Thanksgiving Day, from noon to 3 p.m. Rhough the meal is free of charge, if folks would like to donate toward their meal, any funds collected will be given to Toys for Tots. New toys can also be brought and donated at the door of the event. No reservations needed. Volunteers can always be used to clean tables, refill drinks, and especially for clean-up between 3 and& 4 p.m.

Kelly Ottinger is outreach coordinator at Benzie Area Christian Neighbors.

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