

A portrait of Mark A. Aronchick, a middle-aged man with glasses, smiling. He is wearing a dark suit jacket, a light blue shirt, and a dark blue patterned tie. The background is a blurred interior with wooden paneling.

Mark A. Aronchick

Shareholder, Hangley Aronchick
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Philadelphia

Business Litigation

Pennsylvania Super Lawyers:
2004–2017



Uncommon Decency

Empathy is Mark Aronchick's primary tool

BY MATT AMIS PHOTOGRAPHY BY LUIGI CIUFFETELLI

Last fall, when the American Beverage Association and other businesses filed suit against the city of Philadelphia over the notorious "sweetened beverage tax," there was little doubt whom the city would call.

"We knew that the soda industry was hiring some of the best lawyers around to help them out," says Marcel Pratt, who chairs the city's litigation group. "They had one of the largest corporate law firms in the city and one of the most well-known plaintiff personal injury firms in the city, so we needed to have commensurate firepower."

That's why Mayor Jim Kenney's administration brought in former city solicitor Mark Aronchick, alongside Ken Trujillo, to fend off the suit, which was dismissed in December. As a result, the 1.5-cent-per-ounce levy on beverage distributors, which officials say will help fund expanded pre-kindergarten and state park rehabilitation, took effect on Jan. 1. At press time, it was on appeal.

"What Mark and the team did was marshal the law and make it clear that this is something the city council has a right to do," says city solicitor and former Hanglely Aronchick shareholder Sozi Pedro Tulante. "To have Mark and Ken leading that effort has been invaluable, and they have the knowledge and wisdom to run a team and know the law when there is hundreds of millions at stake—in an age where cities really need that kind of revenue."

Whether in the courtroom or the yoga studio, Aronchick's guideposts are strength and balance. As a founding partner at Hangley Aronchick Segal Pudlin & Schiller, the litigator has had a hand in some of the city's and state's most famous cases.

An old-school activist born of the protests of the 1960s and '70s, Aronchick still has a passion for civic justice, which inspired him to help lead the effort against Pennsylvania's Defense of Marriage Act. He supplements his devout Jewish faith with a healthy dose of curiosity, which leads him to try everything from meditation to power yoga to past-life regression therapy.

As a political powerhouse, he was close to former Gov. Ed Rendell. "I handled a lot of the 'big-problem' cases that Ed Rendell had," Aronchick says. "I mean, the really *big* stuff. The kind that needed a lot of sophisticated legal work and high-level advocacy," including the governor's budgetary retooling for education.

After helping Bill Green win the mayoral election in 1979, Aronchick eventually became the youngest city solicitor in modern Philadelphia history at the age of 33—and over the years grew to prominence as a major ally for the likes of Hillary Clinton, Howard Dean and Bob Casey.

And, at 68, he still kills with kindness everyone he meets.

THE SODA TAX IS CONSIDERED a cornerstone piece of legislation for Mayor Kenney. For Aronchick, it's simply one of his many legacies.

Just ask Helena Miller and Dara Raspberry. The Philadelphia women were two of 23 plaintiffs on *Whitewood v. Wolf*. Aronchick, along with a team of Hangley Aronchick lawyers, ACLU lawyers and Seth Kreimer from the University of Pennsylvania Law School, filed suit in U.S. District Court, seeking to overturn Pennsylvania's 1996 statutory ban on same-sex marriage.

Miller and Raspberry had been married in Connecticut, and moved from New York to Philadelphia to be closer to Miller's family. The women had just welcomed their first child, but were considered unmarried in their new state. They'd needed to enlist legal help just to undergo the lengthy and costly second-parent adoption procedure.

"We had a piece of paper that meant nothing to the state: Everything from legal rights to taxes to benefits weren't recognized in Pennsylvania," Miller says. "It was a little demeaning, to feel like we're equal to others, to be recognized as equal—but not being treated as equals in the eyes of the law."

Aronchick and the team built their case around stories like these; they made it personal. The complaint, filed in July 2013, reads less like a legal document and more like an evocative piece of literature. It contains personal vignettes—in which the plaintiffs are referred to by their first names—about love and loss, families and careers, challenges and sacrifice, and the little slices of life that painted them as not only everyday couples, but as couples who embodied traditional marriage vows.

"When you finish reading the first 30 pages of the complaint," Aronchick says, "I guarantee you, if you have any blood coursing through your veins, you put the complaint down at that point and say, 'I am not discriminating against these people.'"

The case went to summary judgment, allowing the court to rule solely on the briefs without a trial. In May 2014, U.S. District Court Judge John E. Jones III, a Republican appointee of President George W. Bush, released his landmark opinion in poetic fashion, tying each hallmark wedding vow ("for better, for worse," "for richer, for poorer") to the plaintiffs' stories, and ruling that, "We now join the 12 federal district courts across the country which, when confronted with these inequities in their own states, have concluded that all couples deserve equal dignity in the realm of civil marriage."

The momentous, battleground-state decision was part of a sea change. Throughout the summer, governors in other states followed suit, and a year later, the *Obergefell* decision legalized same-sex marriage nationwide.

To Aronchick, it was a victory for humanity and love, and it came about by caring passionately about the people and the circumstances surrounding the case. "That is the magic of winning cases or getting good settlements," he says.

"I always felt like Mark was fighting for us," says Raspberry. "I always felt so confident in their corner, that they were going to get the job done."

Adds Miller: "There were moments where he said—and I believed him—that this is the most important thing he's ever done. He spoke so eloquently about love, and he really honored what we represented and what we did. Around Mark, it was never about the legalese. It was always very personal with him."

Aronchick grew up in Bradley Beach, New Jersey, across town from one Bruce Frederick Joseph Springsteen. His upbringing was a lot like Bruce's best songs: blue-collar, scrappy. His dad ran a restaurant with his brothers while his mother worked a variety of secretarial jobs. Aronchick remembers the lower-middle-class neighborhood for its gumption and sense of community. The town's only synagogue forged togetherness, and his mother—"brilliant and fiercely principled"—influenced his decision to be of service to the public. Along with some friends, they formed the "Kids for Kennedy" club in 1960 and marched around the neighborhood wearing buttons and waving signs. Later, Aronchick won a town-wide essay contest on the topic "What America Means to Me" that led to a trip to the state legislature in Trenton, where he was formally recognized by the General Assembly.

"After that, I just got the bug," he says.

He earned enough scholarships to attend the University of Pennsylvania, where he worked in kitchens to make some extra money, heading home on weekends to drive a Good Humor ice cream truck for a little more. He and some coworkers even drove several trucks to Woodstock.

At Penn, he immersed himself in student protests and civil rights and environmental activism. He became a research assistant to Dr. Henry Abraham, a well-known political science professor, and delved into urban studies issues like alternatives to incarceration under the tutelage of then-teaching assistant and future civil rights legal legend David Rudovsky. "I saw the possibilities," Aronchick says. "Becoming a lawyer felt like a natural fit."

From there it was University of Washington School of Law. In his first week on campus, Aronchick joined a handful of fellow students in suing the school in an effort to force the faculty and administration to open their meetings to student observers. He was eventually



Aronchick has rubbed elbows with not only former President Obama and former Vice President Biden, but also names like Clinton, Mondale and Pelosi. "It's not just fundraising, it's full-body involvement in a campaign," he says. "I really want to get involved in the issues; the advice; going out on the trail with them and being as instrumental as I can possibly be."

elected president of the student body.

After a brief stretch in Chicago, where Aronchick graduated from the University of Chicago School of Law after transferring from Washington, his wife Judi selected Penn for med school, and the couple found themselves back where they'd started.

Aronchick took a job at Wolf, Block, Schorr & Solis-Cohen. There he connected with fellow lawyer and Democrat Bill Green, who had recently lost a U.S. Senate election, but was planning a bid for mayor.

With Green in office, Aronchick began his stint as city solicitor, kick-starting a career of high-profile government projects. "The kind that needed a lot of sophisticated legal work and high-level advocacy," he says. They included the closure of the infamous Pennhurst State School and Hospital, and the deinstitutionalization of its 460 patients.

Following a brief return to Wolf Block, he co-founded Hanglely Aronchick Segal Pudlin & Schiller. The firm started small, but is today known for taking on monumental cases, like the "kids for cash" scandal, in which two Wilkes-Barre judges were convicted of accepting money from a builder of juvenile detention centers in exchange for imposing harsh sentences on youth brought before their courts.

Along the way, Aronchick and Judi had two children of their own, Sara and Jonathan—now both lawyers—on whom he spills heaping amounts of praise. He also works hard mentoring and advising young lawyers and non-lawyers alike.

"I was one that he took under his wing," says city solicitor Tulante. "And not in just substantive work, but in policy stuff around the city. It was exactly what I was looking for: quality litigation and getting to know people around the city." Aronchick entrusted and guided Tulante and other young associates in high-stakes litigation like *NAACP v. Cortes*, which centered on voting machine malfunctions in 2008 elections. "Mark gave us this opportunity during daylong hearings and multiple witnesses. And I'm glad he did that. He has a knack for seeing in people what people might not see in themselves."

In the mid '90s, Aronchick came across Baron Baptiste, who was passing out flyers for his yoga class at a Main Line fitness center—back before yoga had entered the public lexicon. Aronchick struck up a conversation. As usual, he was curious and he had questions. And soon, after a few shaky sessions, Aronchick found his inner yogi.

"Walking out of class, he was feeling like a new person," Baptiste says, "so relaxed and at ease. He said it helped him become a better person in all different areas of life."

Aronchick became a regular, often dragging along friends, family members and fellow attorneys. Baptiste even invited him to his power yoga boot camps—complete with raw-food cleanses and share circles—where the lawyer won over the hardcore yoga crowds. "He creates community wherever he goes," Baptiste says.

It was the same in Beijing, where Aronchick taught a constitutional law class at Tsinghua Law School, and in the Cold War-era Soviet Union, where Aronchick and then-District Attorney Ed Rendell met and fostered relationships with Soviet Jewish dissidents.

"He really wants to contribute to people, whether it's their health or their growth," Baptiste says. "He'll risk being weird or people thinking he's awkward if it helps someone have a positive experience in their life."

"I just see myself as human, as curious," Aronchick says. "What is the world like for that other person? I need that. I need it like I need breath." 