

# Robert L. Sadoff, MD: Renaissance Man of Forensic Psychiatry

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If we are lucky, we will encounter some extraordinary people in our lifetimes. Some may have a profound effect on our lives, others may alter the course.

Robert Leslie Sadoff was born in the wake of the great depression to Midwestern parents who emphasized the value of doing good for others. They exposed him to a unique set of humanistic qualities that later contributed to his acquiring an unyielding commitment to those in need. His family espoused traditional Jewish principles of charity (*tzedakah*), repairing the world (*tikkun olam*), and respect for others in need. His parents influenced him significantly through their professional and personal values. They were graduates of the University of Minnesota School of Pharmacy, and his maternal grandmother was an herbalist. Many of his cousins became physicians or attorneys. His maternal aunt was one of the early women graduates from the University of Minnesota Law School.

Sadoff has always been guided by his religious beliefs and his faith. He recalls, with great wonder, what might have been had his father not taken a morning off in 1941 to say prayers for a recently departed relative. Having decided to carry out this good deed, his father left his post at the prescription desk of the small neighborhood drugstore that he owned in South Minneapolis. At the same time, a fire engine was racing to an emergency when it missed the turn



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and careened into the drugstore, ending up in the prescription department. He lived to tell the tale, and the family welcomed the miracle.

Sadoff was a Hebrew scholar who graduated from the University branch (Beth Midrash) of the Talmud Torah of Minneapolis, where most of the other students in his class either became rabbis or married rabbis. He matriculated at the University of Minnesota at the age of 16, after graduating as valedictorian from North High School. He had to overcome a stuttering problem to deliver his speech. He began with a biblical saying: "Everything is foreseen and yet the freedom of choice is given" (Avot 3:19). These words became a guiding creed for his future lifestyle.

He carried his beliefs to the university and became the president of the Hillel Foundation, the Jewish student organization on campus. He was uncertain about his vocational direction until his father re-

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counted his own unfulfilled dream of becoming a physician, with the apparent hope that the son would consider a career in medicine. Sadoff had mixed feelings about medicine, but after reflection he decided to take an accelerated undergraduate course and head toward medical school. Throughout his training, he always managed to maintain interests in literature, the arts, and the workings of the mind. In medical school, he began to work with one of the pioneer psychopharmacologists, Burtrum Schiele, who was one of the first American psychiatrists to conduct research on *largactil*, later known as *thorazine*.

Sadoff was fortunate enough to meet his future wife while in medical school. However, his parents admonished him against marrying before he finished his studies. Perhaps the most momentous week in his life was in 1959, when he graduated from medical school, took his board examinations, drove to Detroit, and married Joan Handleman on June 21. They will celebrate their 50th anniversary next year.

As he had family in California, Sadoff applied for his internship at the Veterans' Administration Hospital in Los Angeles, where his cousin was chief resident in medicine. Following a one-year general rotating internship, Sadoff was accepted as one of eight residents at the University of California at Los Angeles (UCLA) Neuropsychiatric Institute. He was delighted with the quality of residents who shared his experiences. Most of his teachers in psychiatry at UCLA were psychoanalytically oriented and Sadoff especially enjoyed the journal clubs, literature and psychiatry courses, and psychotherapy demonstrations by many skilled and accomplished clinicians. He recalls that, in those days, many psychiatrists smoked pipes, and one of the classes that was taught was *Psychotherapy and Pipe Smoking*. The lesson was: if the psychotherapist's pipe goes out, he is talking too much.

Influenced by his mother's passion for law and justice, he developed an interest in forensic psychiatry. He was fortunate to be in the vicinity of the University of Southern California, where the pioneering forensic psychiatrist Seymour Pollack was teaching. Pollack would turn out to have a profound impact on Sadoff's career development. There was no formal forensic psychiatry training at UCLA at that time, and Sadoff was a participant in the Berry Plan, which required him to meet his military obligations following completion of his residency training. He started a two-year stint at New Jersey's Fort

Dix with three other psychiatrists. He volunteered for the work in the stockade and courts martial psychiatry at Fort Dix and Walson Army Hospital while attending the law school at Temple University in the evenings. However, he did not obtain a law degree. He believed that his 33 credits were sufficient for him to learn how lawyers think and what they need from mental health professionals.

He met two brilliant mentors at Temple University's Unit in Law and Psychiatry. The first was Samuel L. Polsky, a law professor who taught courses in law and mental health. He played an important role in Sadoff's training and development. Melvin S. Heller was the other half of the forensic psychiatry team, a Yale-educated forensic psychiatrist who helped steer Sadoff's course within medicine and psychiatry. It was Heller who invited him to the first meeting of the American Academy of Psychiatry and the Law (AAPL) in 1969, which was led by Jonas Rapoport and held in Baltimore. There were eight original members of AAPL who met to help each other with the training and teaching of this burgeoning subspecialty of psychiatry. Sadoff was named the first membership director of AAPL, and in that capacity initiated a membership drive with the help of Seymour Halleck and Ames Robey, in Madison, Wisconsin, in late 1969. They began with invitations to 100 practicing psychiatrists to join the newly formed professional organization. After 40 years, AAPL now has close to 2000 members worldwide. Sadoff served as the second president of AAPL from 1971 to 1973. Since that time, he has served on several committees and programs, spearheading the growth and development of AAPL and writing frequently for its *Journal*, as well as serving on its early editorial board.

His career began to take off, as he accepted a position at the University of Pennsylvania in 1972, taking the place of Jonas Robitscher, who had accepted the first national chair in law and psychiatry at Emory University. Sadoff had been assistant professor of psychiatry at Temple University, teaching there and at the Law School of Villanova University. He joined the University of Pennsylvania as assistant professor of psychiatry and rapidly achieved the rank of full professor by 1978.

His first step at the University of Pennsylvania was to invite a psychiatrist from the Philadelphia Naval Base to become his first fellow. The stipend was paid by the Navy, and James Thrasher spent the first year,

1972 to 1973, working with Sadoff and his staff. Two other Navy officers served as fellows during the next two years while the Center for Studies in Social-Legal Psychiatry at the University of Pennsylvania developed its research, training, and clinical programs with the help of grants from the National Institute of Mental Health and the National Institute of Justice.

Sadoff developed a course in forensic psychiatry that was given, for several years, at the Annual Meeting of the American Psychiatric Association. He continued to write and teach, not only in the United States, where he has taught in every state in the country, but also in 12 other countries. He overcame his early speech handicap to become a sought-after speaker on many topics in forensic psychiatry in the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s. He invited his father-in-law to one of his first presentations at the American Psychiatric Association meetings in the early 1970s. At the end of his presentation, which was warmly and enthusiastically received by his peers, his father-in-law said, "Bob, one day you'll be a fine speaker."

The religious values seeded early in life continued to play a central role throughout Sadoff's adulthood. He helped others, not only in psychiatry and forensic psychiatry, but through community and charitable endeavors. He served as president for 15 years of the American Red Magen David for Israel, which is the American support group for the Israeli Red Cross that provides ambulances, blood services, and other lifesaving equipment and provisions for Israelis during difficult times. He became chair of the board in 2002 and retired after three years. He then focused his charitable efforts more locally, becoming active in the Philadelphia Chapter of the Anti-Defamation League, the Center for Social Responsibility of the Jewish Federation of Philadelphia, and, more recently, serving on the Board of Directors and Executive Committee of Gratz College. He has contributed his efforts at Gratz, the outstanding nonsectarian Jewish educational institution in the Philadelphia area. He is planning, in honor of his parents, to establish a symposium on interfaith dialogue, inviting members of other major religions to discuss matters of mutual concern with the hope of establishing good faith among all religions.

When his parents died some 15 years ago, Sadoff and his brother established a scholarship at the University of Minnesota School of Pharmacy: The Max and Rose Sadoff Memorial Scholarship. This bursary

is now given to two students per year, and Sadoff has also established, in conjunction with the scholarship, an annual symposium that sponsors an outstanding speaker in the field of pharmacy, law, and ethics, to address the students, faculty, and members of the community in Minnesota. Thus far, 16 lectures have been given, and Sadoff has edited a book of readings containing 13 of the first 16 lectures.

His students, colleagues, and friends also know another side of him: he is an ardent and enthusiastic collector of antique books, especially in the field of legal medicine and forensic psychiatry. He has encouraged many of his students to purchase classic works in psychiatry and forensic psychiatry, including Benjamin Rush's 1812 first edition on *The Mind* (perhaps the first book on psychiatry published in the United States) and Isaac Ray's *Treatise on the Medical Jurisprudence of Insanity*, published in Boston in 1838. When traveling to examine people in distant places or to testify in courthouses in county seats, he rarely missed an opportunity to hit the book barns and book stores along the way. His own collection grew impressively, and on May 22, 2004, he donated 4,000 books to The Library of The College of Physicians of Philadelphia. The College inaugurated the Robert L. Sadoff, MD, Library of Legal Medicine and Forensic Psychiatry and named Sadoff as the Chair of the Library Advisory Committee. In addition, he established with the library "The Robert L. Sadoff Lecture on Legal Medicine and Forensic Psychiatry." Three lectures have been delivered to date at the college and all of them have been enthusiastically received. He has also initiated a new section at the college, "Medicine, Ethics and Law," through which he and his committee intend to invite speakers to present to the membership and to the community at large lectures and symposia on medical, legal, and ethics-related topics that are significant in contemporary thought.

Even with the many demands on his time, he has always made his family a priority. He and his wife Joan have 4 children and 10 grandchildren. Three of the children are attorneys, and one is an actor. Joan Sadoff, a social worker with two master's degrees, one in education and one in social work, has been on several charity boards herself, including the School of Social Work at LaSalle College in Philadelphia, the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee in New York, the Community Women's Education Project, and the Cheltenham Adult School Board,

where she brought celebrities to speak at the Five Star Forum that she co-chaired for many years. She has also been named to the Temple University Hall of Fame for Social Workers, and in 2006, was the Pennsylvania Social Worker of the Year. She is an accomplished documentarian, having produced two award-winning documentaries on civil rights. Her husband has worked with her on these two projects: the first, "Philadelphia, Mississippi: Untold Stories," and the second, the highly acclaimed "Standing on My Sisters' Shoulders," which won 13 awards nationally and internationally. She has the ideas and is the creative initiator in the couple, but says that her spouse is her enabler. She explains: "I come up with an idea, run it by Bob, and he says 'Great! Let's get on it'—and before I know it, we have airline tickets to Mississippi." He has said that his wife's entry into the field of documentary filmmaking has changed his life, enriched his experiences, and expanded his horizons.

Regarding his work in the clinical forensic world, Sadoff has been a consultant in forensic psychiatry at several state hospitals and prisons, examining thousands of individuals charged with crimes, many of whom were charged with homicide. He has also consulted on several civil and administrative law cases, working equally for the prosecution and defense, or the plaintiff, or defendant, or the judge who requires a third opinion. He is well respected nationally and has appeared in courts in over 20 states and countless federal jurisdictions.

He is the recipient of numerous national awards in forensic psychiatry, including the prestigious Isaac Ray Award in 2006, for which he is currently writing his Isaac Ray Lecture and a book: *Do No Harm—Minimizing the Inherent Harm in Forensic Psychiatric Practice*. He has also received, as co-author with Robert Simon, the 1992 Manfred Guttmacher Award for a book on psychiatric malpractice. He was honored by the International Academy of Law and Mental Health with the Philippe Pinel Award for outstanding work in law and mental health. He received the Nathaniel Winkelman Award from the Philadelphia Psychiatric Center for outstanding contributions to psychiatry. He was given the Lifetime Achievement Award of the Philadelphia Psychiatric Society and has received several other prestigious local awards and honors, including being the named speaker at Thomas Jefferson University Medical School, Temple University, and other institutions of higher edu-

cation. He is especially proud of the two awards he received from the University of Pennsylvania: the Earl D. Bond Award in 1979 for outstanding teaching at the medical school and the Dean's Special Award in 2008 for his significant and unique contributions to the teaching of medicine. This last award honors, in part, his new initiative to establish a formal Forensic Psychiatry Fellowship Training Program at the University of Pennsylvania. He is currently submitting all the paperwork to the various accrediting agencies and hopes to have this program up and running in July 2009. In addition, he has visions of establishing a Center for Forensic Studies at the University of Pennsylvania that will encompass several different schools within the university, including the Law School, the Nursing School, the School of Biomedical Ethics, the School of Communication, the School of Veterinary Medicine, and the School for Social Policy. His intention is to bring together a consortium of scholars under the rubric of forensic science to enhance the training program for the forensic psychiatry fellows and the residents in psychiatry.

Sadoff is most proud of his teaching accomplishments and the influence he has had on many students and residents over the past 45 years. When the American Psychiatric Association met in Philadelphia several years ago, he hosted a reception and videotaped the comments of his former students, all of whom were invited to the reception. His rich legacy is already clear, but he has many more significant items to add to his "bucket list" over the next several years.

He has never turned away a student or colleague who asked for help and has always been there to provide guidance and support. One mark of distinction is that he never says an unkind word about anyone. He has given unselfishly without remuneration to many institutions, including countless hours of helping students and colleagues. Under his influence, many of his students have gone on to make important contributions to the field. He has an outstanding track record as a university professor and forensic expert. His contributions to humankind, built on wisdom and fueled by tireless service, make him, in our opinion, truly a renaissance man. His humanism is infectious, and he inspires most of us who know him with the desire to be better human beings. Asked when he plans to scale back his professional activities, he (now 72 years old) responded, "I have already scaled back—to full time."