

Men Still at Work

If you have your health, you can earn a living and be active and involved with people and issues, and you can help change things for the better.

—Peter Gossels, Attorney



PROFILE: C. PETER R. GOSSELS

A refugee from war-torn Europe, eighty-two-year-old attorney Peter Gossels is deeply rooted in his community and still immersed in his work. In 1939, when he was eight and his little brother, Werner, was five, their mother, Charlotte Lewy Gossels, was desperate to get her sons out of Berlin. She somehow managed to secure visas for her boys from the French Embassy and

they were sent by train to Quincy sous Sénart, twenty miles southeast of Paris, along with thirty-eight other Jewish children. There they were the "guests" of a French count and his wife, a Russian Jew, at the Château de Quincy that had served as a finishing school for White Russian teenage girls, whose parents had fled the Bolshevik takeover of Russia. After the Germans overran northern France in June 1940 and almost killed them during the battle of Fontainebleau, the Gossels brothers spent three months in an orphanage outside of Paris. In January 1941, the brothers were placed in the Château de Chabannes, a home for children run by Oeuvre de Secours aux Enfants, a French Jewish humanitarian organization in the unoccupied zone of France. The tiny hamlet of Chabannes was located near Vichy in central France. An award-winning documentary film, *The Children of Chabannes*, produced and directed by Peter's daughter, Lisa Gossels, and Dean Wetherell in 1999, picks up the story there.

Peter's mother and grandmother were murdered by the Nazis, as were many other members of his family.

The Château de Chabannes sheltered approximately one hundred Jewish children at any given time arriving from Germany, France, Poland, and Austria, who were protected by a staff of counselors led by its director, Félix Chevrier, and the local populace, all of whom were non-Jews. The children learned to speak French and attended the local school, which was conducted by two schoolteachers, the sisters Reine and Renee Paillassou. They also learned basic survival skills. Peter remembers how proud he was to receive two blankets donated to the orphanage by the American Friends Service Committee. And thanks to the assistance of the Quakers and Eleanor Roosevelt, who obtained visas for them (she asked the State Department for ten thousand; she got two hundred), Peter and Werner were among the lucky ones to be rescued and brought to the United States in 1941. The rest of the children who had been at Chabannes were hidden in private French homes, joined the French Resistance, or, when the Nazis could find them, sent to concentration camps.

The Gossels boys were placed with separate foster families in Brookline, Massachusetts. Peter went to Boston Latin and on scholarship to Harvard College and Harvard Law School. Werner went to Brookline High School and had to "settle" for Yale (a little tease between brothers). After serving in the

US Army during the Korean War, Peter returned to Boston in 1956 to look for a job. Unfortunately, Boston law firms in the fifties hired very few Jews. With no money and none of the connections many of his friends could call on, Peter had to make his own way. His first job was at the law firm of Sullivan and Worcester where he trained as a trial lawyer.

He started a family with his wife, Nancy, and they put their roots down in Wayland, a suburban town west of Boston. Their daughter Lisa is an Emmy Award-winning filmmaker; their daughter Amy works as an independent casting director, producer, and teacher; and their son, Daniel, serves as a managing director of Mesa Global, an investment bank in New York City where he and his sisters now live.

From 1965 to 1972, Peter was a partner in the firm of Zelman, Gossels, and Alexander. During this period, Peter worked with soon-to-be-governor Michael Dukakis to develop and enact the first system of no-fault automobile insurance protection in the country. In 1972 he joined the Boston law firm of Weston Patrick, P.A. where he practices in a wide variety of legal specialties to this day—litigation, real estate law, family law, school law and special education, municipal law, corporate and business law, and more. “I deal with people and the problems they bring. Helping people, solving problems keeps me alert and alive. The law is not all fun and games, of course; it’s demanding, and to stay on the cutting edge is a challenge. I’ve been practicing for fifty-six years, but last year was the best year I ever had!” His influence within the legal profession is strong. A Master of the Superior Court, he helped persuade the Boston Bar Association to study ways to make the Massachusetts court system more accessible, less costly and time-consuming, and to adopt changes recommended in the report he coauthored in 2005. He is also a frequent contributor of articles on a variety of professional issues to the *Massachusetts Lawyers Weekly*.

Putting down roots meant contributing his time and expertise to the community. Peter served on the Town of Wayland’s Finance Committee for two years and was Town Counsel for eleven years before being elected moderator of the town meeting. And, extraordinarily (to my mind), Peter served as moderator for thirty years! In my town, citizen self-government is *representative*; approximately two hundred elected members can discuss and vote on articles. In contrast, Wayland has an *open* town meeting, so one or two thousand residents or more can weigh in on every article. To manage the process and give everyone a reasonable opportunity to be heard, Peter developed a *Moderator’s*

Handbook, laying out, for the first time, the rules and regulations that govern town meetings; he introduced separate microphones for “pro” and “con” voices, thus producing more civilized debates; he instituted time limits on the debates; and he implemented the first system of electronic voting to be used at a New England town meeting.

Yet another form of civic engagement is his family’s commitment to public education in Wayland. Nancy and Peter Gossels contributed to a fund for Excellence in the Public Schools, originally funded by his brother, Werner, and his wife, Elaine, to provide money for extra educational opportunities. In addition, the two couples created the Gossels Fund for Human Dignity.

Putting down roots also meant participating in a local congregation. Although proud of their religious identity, the Gossels found going to the synagogue was like going to a museum because the forms of prayer seemed ossified and lifeless. Peter and Nancy set out in 1980 to revitalize Reform Judaism and make the prayer book less male-dominated. As a result, the lay members of the congregation, led by the Gossels and Joan S. Kaye, published an *egalitarian* prayer book, *Vetaher Libenu*, which features nonsexist, inclusive language; uses feminine and masculine pronouns to refer to God; and includes both the matriarchs and the patriarchs. It also featured many original poems by Nancy Lee Gossels. Thousands of copies have been sold all over the world to Christians as well as Jews. Nancy and Peter also led a team, including Harry Abadi, Gary Bean, and Ellen Zellner, who edited and published an egalitarian Machzor for Rosh Hashanah, and composed a siddur (prayer book) for weekday prayers titled *Canfey Hashachar* in 2003 and other prayer books. As a result, all prayer books published by the Reform Movement are now egalitarian and many conservative congregations have adopted the egalitarian language pioneered by Nancy, Peter, and Joan.

Defining all of the many leadership roles Peter has assumed over the years is his worldview as a lawyer. “I don’t think of it as my career. It shapes my life, and it is what I am. If you have your health, you can earn a living and be active and involved with people and issues, and you can help change things for the better. If I didn’t have enough clients to support myself, of course, I would have to retire; but so long as I can attract new clients, I will be able to continue my practice, contribute to my community and enjoy my life, because the challenge of work keeps me sharp, up-to-date and involved with the best and the brightest of my clients and colleagues.”

Peter admits he wouldn't know what to do with himself if he retired. "When I meet retired people socially, I often find their conversation less interesting, less stimulating, because they tend to see the world as spectators; not as people who are engaged in making a difference. To be honest, it frightens me. I've seen too many people retire and die." While he gets no pressure from family and friends to stop working, Peter knows that Nancy would like him to do more traveling with her. They have already been to countries all over the world, including to France for a reunion of the surviving children of Chabannes and the elderly Paillassou sisters in 1996. Those heroic teachers and the director who risked their own lives to save the children of Chabannes have since been designated "Righteous among the Nations" at Yad Vashem in Jerusalem.

Uprooted from his first home some seventy-four years ago, Peter Gossels knows how fortunate he was to be able to build a successful life in America with a wonderful wife and family and a profession he loves. As Lisa Gossels described him in a 2009 interview for the journal *Pulse-Berlin*: "My father is someone who believes in being a productive member of society. His response to his own personal tragedy wasn't to feel sorry for himself or bitter, but to make family a priority, to embrace an inclusive and progressive form of Judaism, to be involved in social justice and cultural institutions, and to give back through philanthropy."



Peter Gossels's worldview as a lawyer shapes his life. Men like Peter seek to change things for the better. Sartre would call this an ethics of action and involvement. And I am also reminded of the practical advice proffered by the plain-spoken and (literally) straight-shooting Mormon cowboy who ran the working horse and cattle ranch in Arizona where I spent two glorious summers in the 1950s: "The one who puts the most into anything gets the most out of it in return. . . . Each day is a page in your life's storybook. Put something good in each day so when it is finished it will be good reading material with no regrets." I hope readers of *Men Still at Work* will agree that the men who shared pages from their personal and professional storybooks have provided good reading material. They are reaping what they have sown (to mix metaphors) and with luck and good health can continue to do so as long as they wish.

To be sure, working late can be taxing for men in their sixties, seventies, or eighties. With the exception of Jim Fannin, the historic preservationist and cemetery conservationist you met in chapter 6, and perhaps a few others, the older men I studied are engaged in professions that do not require heavy physical labor. Nonetheless, job-related travel, stress, and fatigue can be wearing, as can the stress associated with the various financial uncertainties caused by our still-ailing economy. A challenge for some is trying to achieve a salutary work-life balance that accommodates family and friends, plus time for home maintenance, recreation, fitness, and cultural and community/volunteering activities. And for others, delaying retirement avoids having to address a worrisome problem: What comes next? Whether they live to work or work to live—whatever their reasons—ever-increasing numbers of highly accomplished older men with stable, interesting professional jobs that pay relatively well are gladly continuing in the paid labor force, thus proving that work can certainly be an important part of successful aging. While many of their peers and men even younger have already retired, older men still at work are in the vanguard of a strengthening trend.