

Michael Mills

Michael Mills, revered innovator of technology for the legal industry, dies at 77



Michael Mills, the co-founder and President of Neota and a polymath with careers in legal technology, litigation, and local television, has died. He was 77.

Michael died on October 1, 2023, at his home in St. Helena, California, of complications from leukemia. His life partner, Karen MacNeil, was at his side.

Called “the leading global figure in law firm technology” by Richard Susskind, Michael was known as both an innovator and a role model within the legal community. The Chairman and CEO of Elevate Law, Liam Brown, spoke for many when he said “Law has lost a visionary strategist, an imaginative practitioner, and a business leader. We have all lost an extraordinary friend.”

Skadden’s Harris Tilevitz described Michael as a mensch. “I used to tell my kids when they were little and they asked what a mensch was, think of the person you like the most, who you want to be the most. And that is Michael.

Kind, unassuming, gentle, brilliant, and someone you want to be like. From almost the first time I met him in 1987, I always wanted to be Michael.”



Escaping from Legalweek 2020 (l-r: Jeff Rovner, Michael, Oz Benamram, Ali Shahidi)

In his 50+ years in the law, Michael played many roles. He attended law school at the University of Chicago, serving as a research assistant to Professor Richard Posner. He practiced litigation at two premiere New York law firms, then left a prestigious partnership role to begin a 20-year knowledge management career at Davis Polk & Wardwell, where he devised several revolutionary technologies for lawyers, and helped build a ground-breaking expert system to support the firm’s international bankruptcy practice. Drawing from his experience with expert systems, Michael left Davis Polk in 2010 to co-found Neota Logic, one of the first software companies to apply artificial intelligence to legal work.

While Michael blazed his own trail, he was a kind and indispensable mentor to others who sought to transition out of their legal practices and into technology and knowledge management roles. He established informal groups where like-minded professionals could exchange ideas and seek advice. He shared his hard-won insights as a valued speaker at legal

technology conferences. And he willingly offered one-on-one help to others coming up through the ranks.



Annual NY dinner, 2012 (l-r: Ron Friedmann, Harris Tilevitz, Todd Mattson, Eugene Stein, Peter Lesser and Michael)

Simpson Thacher's Oz Benamram said of Michael: "I admire both what Michael has achieved professionally and the person that he was. His generosity, combined with his superior brain, made him a pillar of the legal tech community. I see him as one of the founding fathers of legal KM, innovation, and LegalTech. And a very kind one, who not only paved the way, but also helped others walk on it."

Along the way, Michael quietly but effectively lent his time, expertise, and money to the causes he found important. He co-founded the Central Park Conservancy, the nonprofit organization entrusted with the day-to-day care and management of Central Park. He served as Fellow, board member, and President of the College of Law Practice Management, and funded the College's annual innovation awards. And he acted as founding director, vice chair, and generous financial contributor to Pro Bono Net, a nonprofit corporation created to improve the coordination and delivery of pro bono legal services through technology.

Mark O'Brien, Executive Director of Pro Bono Net, recalled Michael's contributions. "It was not surprising that we would turn to Michael as a founding board member. He was a founder's dream advisor: endlessly generous with his time, professional connections, and good ideas, but completely without ego or need to be in control or even acknowledged. Michael possesses a rare combination of deep intellectual curiosity and love for rolling up his sleeves to solve difficult challenges, with a keen sense of the possible. He is also deeply committed to making the world a better place and is an unfailingly loyal friend. I and my colleagues at Pro Bono Net have benefitted from those attributes on countless occasions over the past 25 years."

Michael was born September 26, 1946, in Rochester, New York. His father, John Mills IV, was a photographer and filmmaker. His mother, Elisabeth (Parker) Mills, was a social worker and political activist. Both were liberals and die-hard New Yorkers.



Photo of Michael taken by his father.

“My parents felt for a long time like expatriates living in Rochester,” Michael said. “They were very New York-ish people, and they went back and forth to New York City a lot to go to the theater. We read the New Yorker every week and they took us to New York City occasionally for trips. There wasn’t any question in my mind once I became a young adult that I was going to live in New York.” After law school, Michael made Manhattan his home for 35 years.

From almost the beginning, Michael’s life was shaped by his unconventional choices.

When he was a sophomore in high school in Rochester, a family member told him about the Phillips Exeter Academy. As Michael later recalled, “I thought that was intriguing. So I wrote away for the catalog and the admissions forms, filled all the forms out, and went to my parents for their signature on the application. They looked at me like ‘What? You want to go away for boarding school?’”

During his two years at Exeter, Michael became the editor of the school newspaper. He credited two of the school’s teachers for igniting his lifelong love of writing.

Michael made another unconventional choice for his college. Fourteen members of his family, including his father and one of his brothers, attended the University of Chicago. The school named buildings and professorships after his relatives. His family assumed Michael would follow suit. But on the basis of a chance encounter with a student at Reed College in Portland, Oregon, Michael moved across the country to pursue his studies there. “Reed said, ‘Please come.’ And I had never been west of Chicago. The Pacific Coast is a fascinating place. Portland seems a lovely city. Reed felt to me like a place that was intellectually open. And so I went off to Reed.”

That decision led to a series of unexpected opportunities.

While attending classes, he became the head of a local Portland radio station. In his junior year, he took a leave of absence to pursue an internship at the Institute for Policy Studies in Washington, DC, which soon led to an opportunity to join the presidential campaign of anti-war candidate Eugene McCarthy. Michael was invited to manage the campaign in Oregon. He was with Senator McCarthy in Los Angeles the evening Bobby Kennedy was assassinated. Later he accompanied the candidate to the Democratic National Convention in Chicago, where he witnessed clashes between the police and anti-war protesters.

"I encountered something I'd never seen," Michael said, "which was a street battle in the United States, in the middle of the 20th Century. With these guys in big Chicago leather police jackets and a couple of guys on horses just knocking kids down for the hell of it really. And the Secret Service agents with me were so incensed by this unprofessional behavior of two policemen that they intervened in one incident right in front of us. They went up to one Chicago policeman – there were two of them together beating on a kid – and said 'you need to stop this. 'Who the fuck are you?' 'Well, we're the US Secret Service.'" And that got through to them and those two cops stopped."

Returning to Reed, and while writing his senior thesis, Michael took a part-time job at a Portland television station, where he became so successful as a reporter and writer that he was given his own program – *City on My Mind*, a weekly TV show in which Michael interviewed local political figures. He was offered a promising career in broadcast journalism, but opted instead to attend law school at the University of Chicago.

In 1970, three months into his legal studies, Michael was drafted into the Army to fight in the Vietnam war. "My advanced training was going to be in the infantry school, which guaranteed that I was gonna go to Vietnam in a combat role," he recalled. "And I had persuaded myself in some very complicated way that although I deeply opposed the war in Vietnam, and supported the rights of people to choose not to fight in it, I was not actually a conscientious objector. I did not believe that the use of military force was *per se* wrong. I thought this war was wrong but that I couldn't get out of it by saying I'm a conscientious objector. If I'm going to get drafted, I'm going to get drafted."

Facing the potentially fatal prospect of being shipped off to Vietnam as an infantryman, Michael made some other unconventional choices.

He learned there was a personnel office responsible for reviewing the resumes of every person who entered the Army, and a sergeant who scoured those resumes to find people who could help him run his office efficiently. "The sergeant pulled out most of the MBAs and some of the lawyers and somehow finagled the records of the Pentagon so they were never subject to the call for overseas duty." Michael interviewed with the sergeant, highlighting his experience with computers and punch cards for data processing. The next morning, the sergeant plucked him out of the infantry to work on projects for the Pentagon.

When that assignment ran its course, and Michael was once again at risk of being shipped abroad, he remembered that one of the prized skills he had seen on Army resumes was cooking. He applied for and received an

assignment as a chef to a two-star general and his family. At the end of his tour of cooking duty, the general presented Michael with a general purpose medal. “I asked the general why. He said “Well, all of it, all of your good service deserves a reward. But it was your whole wheat bread that really swung it.”

Upon his discharge from the Army, Michael returned to the University of Chicago to finish law school. In his spare time he was a research assistant to two renowned professors—criminologist Norval Morris and Richard Posner, one of the creators of the field of law and economics. On his 27th birthday, Morris and Posner organized a birthday party in his honor. Michael later recalled, “It was a wonderful evening. We were sitting in the Morrises basement in Hyde Park and there was Dick Posner and his wife playing along with all of this.”

After graduating from law school and completing a clerkship with federal district judge J.M. Burns in Portland, Michael made his way east to find a job with a prestigious Manhattan firm. He had offers from Simpson Thacher and Davis Polk, but couldn’t choose between them. One friend advised him “If the firm has a separate bathroom for the partners or a separate lunchroom for the partners, don’t go there.” Both Simpson and Davis Polk passed that test. So Michael sought advice from the dean of the University of Chicago law school.

“I called Phil Neill from a phone booth. He said, ‘They’re both fantastic law firms. You could have a great career at either one. I think Davis Polk at this time is a stronger ship.’ So I accepted an offer from them.”

After practicing eight years at Davis Polk, Michael left to accept a partnership in the New York office of Mayer Brown. He enjoyed the litigation work, but missed the technology tools he had relied upon at Davis Polk. He complained to the firm’s chairman, Bob Hellman. Hellman promptly put Michael in charge of a new technology committee for the firm.

Michael hired Price Waterhouse to help set up Mayer Brown’s IT infrastructure. Before long, Price Waterhouse asked him to become a partner in the company’s law department consulting team. “I was working with the partner in charge of that group. And I realized that in all the time I had known him, he’d gotten on an airplane for most of each week. And I thought that’s not what I want to do. But it got me thinking about being something other than a law firm partner at that point.”

That line of thought led Michael to what was, perhaps, his most unconventional decision—to leave a lucrative law firm partnership role to take an administrative position in technology. Henry King, then the

managing partner at Davis Polk, had heard about the technology system Michael had built for Mayer Brown's lawyers, and asked him to rejoin Davis Polk to do the same for them. Michael accepted, taking on the new title Director of Professional Services and Systems, a job he held for 20 years. Even today, Michael's colleagues admire the boldness of his decision. Liam Brown described Michael as "an accomplished, straight-out-of-central casting traditional lawyer who made a leap in the dark."

Michael's 14 years as a practicing lawyer and law firm partner gave him invaluable insights in his new technology role. He knew what lawyers needed, and he knew how to pitch new tools to them effectively. He shared these insights freely with others in the technology and knowledge management communities. Gartner's Ron Friedmann is one of many who benefited from Michael's advice. "We met by 1990 and have been in touch via multiple professional circles ever since. I learned from him how to work with and influence lawyers, especially partners. I admired how much he accomplished in often difficult-to-navigate partnerships. And his simple yet clever approaches to tricky problems."

During his 20 years as a knowledge management and technology leader at Davis Polk, Michael pioneered many advancements that later became commonplace among top law firms. He was either the first, or among the very first, to implement a law firm intranet, a content management system, a customer relationship management system, a document management system with integrated full-text search, an executive information system, and a matter information system.

Michael also created, in 2000, what may have been the earliest and most ambitious expert system in use within a law firm. He collaborated with Fred Parnon, then the CEO of the software company Jnana, and Laureen Bedell, who was then a partner at Davis Polk. Bedell described it as "a humongous Global Credit expert system Michael developed that our banking clients [including Morgan Stanley and Goldman, Sachs] used for decades to test credit risk in over 60 jurisdictions worldwide." The system incorporated 11,000 rules, 80 products, and 25 industry agreements. It delivered nuanced legal judgments on a seven-point scale.

That expert system led to the final chapter of Michael's distinguished career. In 2010, over a bottle of wine at an Indian restaurant, Michael and his long-time collaborator John Lord decided to team up with Fred Parnon to re-launch Jnana as a new software company. The company—Neota Logic—was intended to help law firms "productize expertise" by creating expert systems like the one Michael had built at Davis Polk. So Michael left the firm to become the first CEO of Neota.

Since 2010, under Michael's guidance, Neota has grown to become tremendously sophisticated, a "no-code" platform to develop advanced applications for law firms and companies. Over time the product expanded to include document automation, workflow, and an ambitious language translation feature. Law firms and law departments widely adopt Neota. Pro bono organizations acquire the software to enhance their "access to justice" initiatives. Leading universities around the world teach Neota, enabling students to build legal solutions of their own without computer science skills. Michael continued to work with the Neota team to improve the software up until his death.

One of Michael's close friends in the legal technology community, John Alber, summed up Michael's extraordinary life in an anecdote about his purchase of a classic 33' sailboat, so famous it now rests in the Mystic Seaport Museum. "Michael bought the 1926 Aida on the condition he would completely restore it to its as-built state on the day it first slipped into the water. That open-ended undertaking speaks so much about Michael: the things he will do for love, the strength of his commitments, and his willingness to take extraordinary, but extraordinarily calculated, risks. In many ways, we see his whole life in that one act."

Alber saw the culmination of these qualities in Michael's decision to leave the shores of Manhattan in 2018 to join his life partner, Karen MacNeil, and her daughter Emma in land-locked St. Helena, California. "For love and only love, Michael was willing to abandon the sea and move to an area so free of salt air that he was forced to take his boating on a fancy rowing machine with only CGI screenshots of the water. That's a degree of love that leaves me breathless. As far as I'm concerned, it's as close to perfection as we humans get."

Michael is survived by his life partner, Karen MacNeil, and by his two brothers, John Mills V and Peter Mills.

In lieu of flowers, memorial donations may be made online in Michael's name to Pro Bono Net at <https://everloved.com/life-of/michael-mills-tribute/> or by check to Pro Bono Net, 228 Park Avenue S, PMB 90360, New York, NY 10003-1502.



Karen, Michael, and Max in their garden (2022)