



# THE MANAGER

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## MEA LOST A HERO:

# REMEMBERING JOEL FISHELSON

*By Vanessa DeSantis*

Joel Fishelson, throughout a 38 year career at HRA and then as an MEA activist, never forgot who he worked for or tired of reminding co-workers who they served: the people of our city. He passed away on July 20, 2019 in Forest Hills, New York. He was 77 years old.

During his distinguished years at HRA Mr. Fishelson held a series of critical positions at the Medical Assistance Program and Family Independence Administration (FIA). He retired in 2002 as FIA's Director for Fiscal Planning and Program Integrity.

He was elected MEA Director-at-Large in 2006 and re-elected in 2009 and 2012.

Joel took his concern for and commitment to the people of New York City seriously. Whether it was spending government funds accurately and accountably during his years at HRA or driving all over the City and suburbs as MEA's ombudsman in order to ensure that members received the full range of the benefits they were due, friends and colleagues alike recall his decency always shining through.

**"Joel's official position at HRA was always one of ensuring and enhancing integrity," said Patricia M. Smith, former First Deputy Commissioner of HRA and a close friend of Mr. Fishelson. "He did it so well."**



### THE ONE-MAN THINK TANK

At the MEA Joel was considered the "think tank" of the Association, finding innovative ways to create new benefits and recruit new members. He brought in new and improved member benefits as part of his leadership as Chair of its Organization Committee. There, he reviewed member health care issues and worked with the City's Office of Labor Relations Management Benefits Fund to expand member benefits, remembered longtime friend Larry Konstan, who worked closely with Joel on these issues.

He was always available to members to help educate them on their

hard-earned benefits and to help them navigate the benefits providers' bureaucracies. Joel was also good at developing opportunities to enhance the MEA.

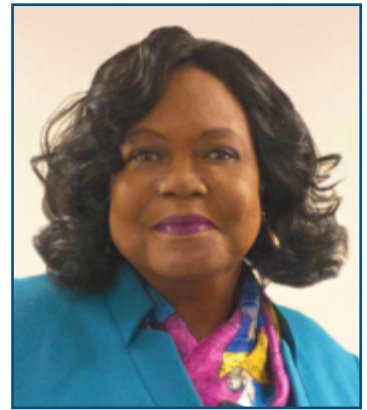
A great example - when Mr. Konstan retired, Mr. Fishelson saw a "ready recruit," convincing him to run for office in the Retirees Chapter. He did.

**"MEA has lost a Hero who can't be replaced," said Mr. Konstan.**

Former MEA President Stu Eber knew Mr. Fishelson for 45 years, beginning with HRA and then at the MEA. Mr. Eber spoke of his friend's characteristically diplomatic approach:

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# Bits & Pieces



## JOEL FISHELSON'S LEGACY OF SERVICES AND BENEFITS

*By Linda A. Barnes, NYC MEA Executive Director and NYC MEA President Emeritus Stu Eber*

Many of us were saddened by the passing of Joel Fishelson. He was our colleague, friend and mentor. His legacy will remain for years to come for past, present and future MEA members who never have or will meet him. Joel was always looking to find ways to create new services and benefits or improve existing ones on behalf of our members and all managers.

### **JOEL FISHELSON NYC MEA CAREER DEVELOPMENT PROGRAM (CDP) SCHOLARSHIP PROGRAM**

We are naming our annual scholarships for members and their dependent children the Joel Fishelson NYC MEA Career Development Program (CDP) Scholarship Program because he was instrumental in creating the benefit and supporting the creation of the CDP to help support it.

Tuition reimbursement for CUNY courses related to a manager's career was requested by some members. Joel worked with the CUNY Murphy Institute to meet this need.

Until Joel became chair of the Organization Committee, members had to pay Counsel to represent them for job-related issues with the Inspector General and other investigative proceedings. Joel negotiated an agreement with Stuart Salles for free representation. This service also included free legal consultation and

discounted rates for non-work related problems.

Working together with Joel, we developed Lunch & Learn seminars in your work locations to help educate members on MBF, citywide and MEA benefits.

### **FINANCIAL PLANNING SEMINARS**

Tina Ramsey and Joel expanded our Financial Planning Seminar program to help educate members about their options for investments, taxes and pensions.

When members expressed concerns about our pension counseling service, Joel negotiated a contract with the Civil Service Retired Employees Association (CSREA) for unlimited free lifetime pension counseling.

Free introductory Toastmasters International membership is available to MEA members because Joel worked with Carol Brooks and Evelyn Marrero to join this nonprofit educational organization that operates clubs worldwide for the purpose of promoting communication and public speaking skills.

### **MEMBERS ONLY BENEFITS**

When members told us about their problems with citywide or MBF benefits, Joel worked with the MBF and alternate sources, particularly Winston Financial Group, to address these concerns. Winston's Voluntary Insurance Plans (VIP) include Disability Insurance, which plugs the gap for the unavailability of short

term disability benefits from the City, the Careington Dental & Vision Discount Plan, which helps retirees who live outside the Healthplex and Davis Vision networks receive discounted benefits, as well as other disability and life insurance options. Joel also worked with EPIC to develop a hearing health care benefit for MEA members.

Joel worked extensively with the Management Benefits Fund to improve benefits and the providers' responsiveness. Effective January 1, 2012, the annual maximum for services rendered under the Dental Program was increased from \$2,500 to \$4,000 per person.

Also effective January 1, 2012, the lifetime orthodontic maximum was increased to \$4,000 from \$2,500 per person.

When members were having problems with their benefits claims, Joel would meet with them in their home, work location or the MEA office to help them develop their appeals. Larry Konstan and Joel would draft formal letters of appeal to the MBF, highlighting the member's documentation and the provider's failure to meet the terms of their contracts. Most appeals were successful.

We are working with the Executive Board, Officers, Volunteer Corps members and MEA staff to continue Joel's incredible legacy so our members will have more and better services and benefits in the coming years.

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**"Joel personified the observant participant who respected all points of view while maintaining his principles in his tireless efforts educating managers about their benefits. He was the hardest working man in MEA," noted Mr. Eber.**

### CEMENT

MEA's Legal Counsel, Stuart Salles was a lifelong friend; they played on the same football team in Brownsville during junior high. Later, Mr. Fishelson planned all their reunions, acting as the "cement" that kept old friends together and the mediator of any conflict among them.

**"His compassion and concern for all of us knew no bounds. He was a great natured mensch whom we could always count on for help and support," added Mr. Salles.**

While some have lifelong memories with Joel, others knew him as a consummate professional from whom they learned lifelong skills.

Linda Barnes, MEA's Executive Director, described the important impact Mr. Fishelson had on her leadership. He recommended including families of MEA members when creating a benefits plan.

**"Through Joel I learned that any problems affecting our members also affected their families. He was a strong advocate for providing benefits and services for the entire family. For a period of time, I disagreed with him, but I am extremely pleased that through his actions, he was able to convince me and I will never forget the valuable lesson learned," said Ms. Barnes.**

### MEA MEMBERS' BENEFITS

Mr. Fishelson created the Legal Services Program covering both work and non-work related areas and revamped the Pension Counseling service to allow for unlimited member access.

Along with Tina Ramsey, he was a driving force behind expanding the Financial Planning Seminar series and he presided over a major expansion of the Scholarship Awards Program. Mr. Fishelson created MEA's Volunteer Corps to encourage member participation and facilitate successful project completion.

Joel led the development of the new Voluntary Insurance Program designed to address benefit gaps by offering coverage, such as short term disability and a plan to reduce out-of-pocket expenses for members who use non-network dental and/or visual benefits providers. He developed strategies to substantially increase the Association's membership by 10 percent a year.

### PERSONAL TOUCH

Former MEA President William Dworkin recollects Joel's contribution to the MEA benefits package, appreciating his close friend's soft tone and manner. **"He had an amazing knack of thinking up ways to help MEA members. And he always had such a charming way to call on his often unsuspecting friends and colleagues to help make that happen. I shall miss my pal," he said.**

Those who knew Joel called to mind his unique "personal touch." Longtime friend and neighbor, and



**Joel Fishelson**

May 30, 1942 – July 20, 2019

fellow MEA member, Alan Pinchoff shared a story about this rare quality:

**"Joel and I spent a lot of time socializing over lunch, movies, lectures and dinners. Invariably, his phone would ring with members calling with questions about benefits, work issues and retirement concerns. When I asked him why he would give his phone number to everyone who approached him, he responded, 'If I can be of help, why not?'"**

**"This captures the essence of Joel," Mr. Pinchoff said. "He was there to help."**

*Joel, with his mild manner and tenacity; his inspiring work ethic and ability to keep everyone together, will be deeply missed.*



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