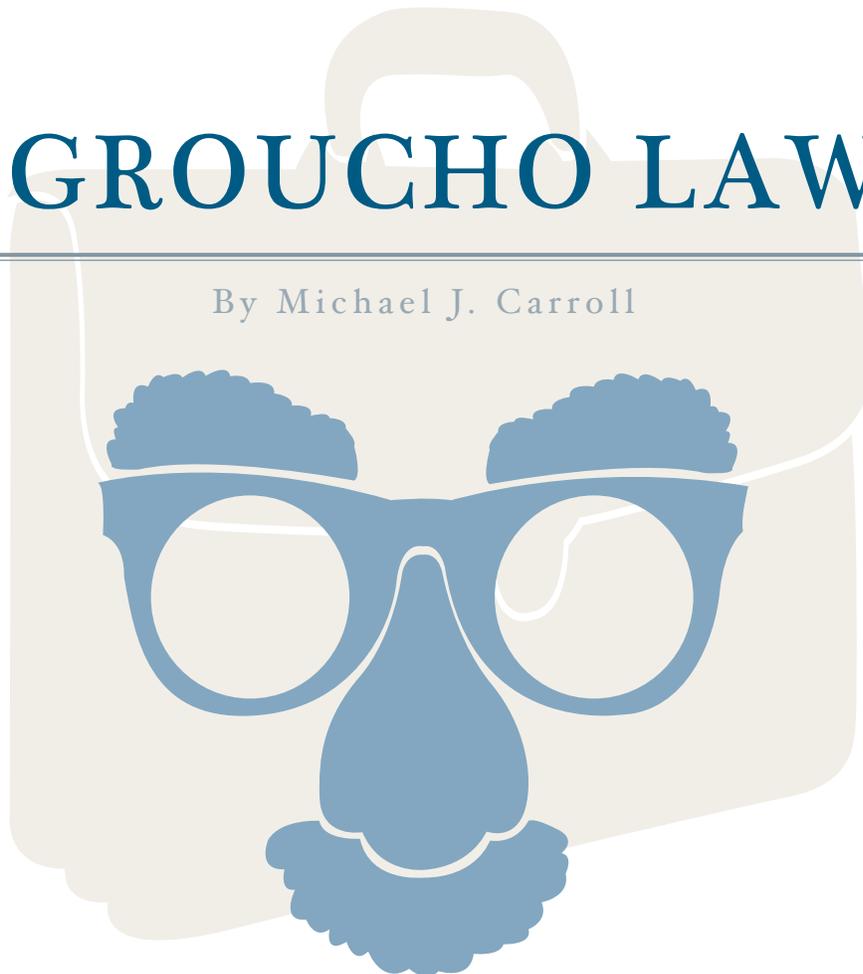


THE GROUCHO LAWYER

By Michael J. Carroll



Times had changed. The 1960s were over and the revolution had not arrived. There was still a dedicated segment of my generation that believed in social change, progressive, even radical change brought about by lots of people working hard over time. They worked in many American communities, urban, rural and everything in between.

These activists and idealists believed that the legal system could not accomplish the big changes that were needed. Lawyers and lawsuits had their place as aids to change, maybe even as sparks and catalysts from time to time. But the real work would be done out there in the streets and in communities, not in the courts.

My decision to apply to law school was not an easy one. It was questionable, if not suspect. I prepared myself for the hard questions from activist friends. Where was my true commitment to the struggle? Wasn't I being elitist? I had thought about these questions and believed I was prepared for at least some. I was not prepared for Frankie.

Frankie had been a heroin user since his teens, taking many

journeys from K&A to North Philly with \$7 in his pocket – no more no less – just enough to make his buy. He had gotten clean in the politically active phase of his life. I never saw any scores, but I am willing to bet that any fair test would have hung the genius label around his neck.

His eyes shined subdued surprise when I revealed my career plan. The rest of his long, rail-thin body gave no clue

of what he was thinking. Frankie shook back his fine brown shoulder length hair as twin streams of cigarette smoke flowed from the nostrils of his prominent beak of a nose. He paused still and silent, then rolled his large protruding buggy eyes as his thought jelled. Finally he spoke.

“You know, Mike, I could never really see you as a lawyer... Maybe as Groucho Marx playing a lawyer, but not as a lawyer.”

I guess I have been trying to sort out my role ever since. ■

Michael J. Carroll (mcarroll@clsphila.org) is a public interest lawyer in Philadelphia and a member of the Editorial Board of The Philadelphia Lawyer.