



## Meet Maricela Banuelas Our Social Security Disability Case Manager

As my brother Jeremy said in last month's newsletter, the good work we do here at The Injury and Disability Law Center would be impossible without our dedicated, hardworking staff. Last month, he introduced you to Isabel, our personal injury case manager and a bright light in our office. This time around, I'm going to keep spreading the appreciation by telling you about our Social Security disability case manager, Maricela Banuelas.

As the Social Security disability case manager over the past six years, Mari has ushered hundreds of our Social Security disability cases from beginning to end. She helps our clients fill out their paperwork, makes sure everything is filed on time, and walks them through every step of the grueling appeals process, which can take months or even years. Mari stays actively involved in every single claim, which requires an amazing amount of dedication and energy.

Apart from her incredible organizational skills, I think one of Mari's greatest assets is the pride she takes in caring for our clients. She gives them as much time and attention as she would her own family, and she isn't afraid to do the difficult parts of the job, like sitting clients down for frank discussions about their health.

**“Mari has ushered hundreds of our Social Security disability cases from beginning to end.”**

If a Social Security disability client isn't being seen by a doctor, for example, that can dramatically affect their case's chance of approval. Mari has no problem sitting down with them to explain why it's important they visit a doctor and what evidence we need to help them through the appeal process. It's not always easy to have those conversations, but it's in the client's best interest, and Mari knows that. She does an incredible job keeping an eye on them, getting updates on how they're doing, and ensuring they stay on track for success.

Mari is a New Mexico native and knew from the time she was in high school that she wanted to study to become a legal assistant. It's a hectic job, but she says she loves coming to work every day.

“I like doing research, and I really like helping people,” Mari says. “They're in a tough situation already, and I just like to make things easier and smoother for them.”

When she's not in the office, Mari spends as much time as she can with her husband, Gustavo, and their 13-year-old daughter, Yaneli. They're a tightknit family of three and do almost everything together.

“My entire world circles around them,” she says fondly.

The trio passes their evenings cooking and enjoying time with extended family. Gustavo works in the oil and gas industry, and Yaneli takes dance lessons, so they're always busy with their jobs and her performances.



At work, Mari says her coworkers at The Injury and Disability Law Center are almost like a second family.

“We all get along,” she says. “We all talk about each other's families and hang out, and we celebrate each other's birthdays.”

As for her clients, Mari says she wants to make sure they know that no matter how difficult things seem, “We're here to help.” That's a sentiment I know our whole office can get behind.

*-Josh Worley*

# Ambassador to the Mole People

## PRESIDENT ADAMS' JOURNEY TO THE CENTER OF THE EARTH

Today, some of the most fantastic discoveries are being made in the far reaches of space, but there was a time when people were more interested in what was going on beneath their feet. In the early 1820s, a United States army officer named John Cleves Symmes Jr. traveled the country teaching audiences about the Hollow Earth Theory.

Symmes and some others at the time believed the Earth was made up of several solid spheres, one inside of another. They also believed each of these subterranean worlds was habitable and full of life. This is where the myth of the mole people originated.

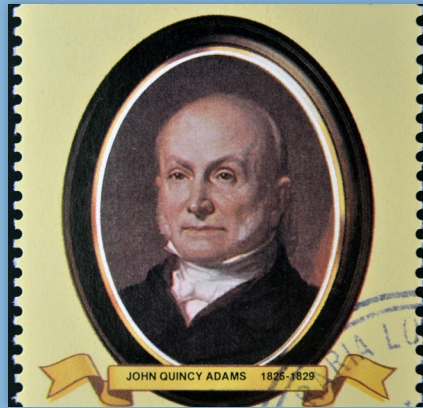
Symmes wanted to lead an expedition to the North Pole, where he believed he would find an entrance to the center of the Earth. He went to Congress and lobbied for money to fund his expedition. Congress shot him down, but Symmes found an ally in an unlikely place: President John Quincy Adams.

John Quincy Adams was the sixth president of the United States and son of the second president and founding father, John Adams. He traveled the world with his father, graduated from Harvard with honors, helped create

the national observatory, and secured funding for the Smithsonian Institution. It's possible Adams' interest in Symmes' trip to the North Pole was less about the Hollow Earth Theory and meeting the mole people than his larger interest in learning more about such a remote part of the world. However, Adams' reputation as a naturalist didn't protect him from scrutiny.

Even in the early 1800s, the Hollow Earth Theory was like the Flat Earth Theory today; there were a couple avid supporters, but most people knew it was ridiculous. Having a sitting U.S. president greenlight the expedition was shocking. However, you didn't learn about Symmes' expedition in your history class for a reason. Adams wasn't a popular president, and not just because he might have wanted to meet the mole people. He only served one term. By the time the expedition started to get off the ground, Andrew Jackson had been elected, and he quickly killed the project.

In 1936, Congress would approve funding for an expedition to the South Pole, though this expedition focused on exploring the surface of the Earth, not what is underneath it.



# Halloween Decorations or Fighting Words?

## A GRAVE LEGAL MATTER

We've all played a harmless trick or two, but sometimes, Halloween shenanigans get out of hand. They can lead to hurt feelings, outraged neighbors, and, in the case of *Purtell v. Mason*, a lawsuit.

In the days leading up to Halloween, all was not quiet in the village of Bloomingdale. Previously parked in a storage unit, Jeff and Vicki Purtell's 38-foot RV was now parked in front of their house. In protest, neighbors petitioned to town officials, wanting an ordinance put in place to prohibit RV parking on residential property.

While the ordinance was under consideration, Jeff Purtell took matters into his own hands. He erected six wooden tombstones in his front yard. They seemed to be innocuous Halloween decorations, but these

tombstones displayed a special message for the neighbors. Each headstone was inscribed with a sarcastic message and house number, implying the occupants' death dates. These messages soon caught the neighbors' attention.

*"Bette wasn't ready, but here she lies, ever since that night she died. Twelve feet deep in this trench, still wasn't deep enough for that stench! 1690."*

Insulted and a little afraid, Purtell's neighbors called the police to have the headstones removed. After a couple of visits, Officer Bruce Mason arrived and threatened to arrest Purtell if he didn't take the tombstones down. Purtell obliged, but the matter wasn't put to rest.

### The Verdict

Purtell sued Officer Mason on the grounds of violating his rights to free speech, and the case made it all the way to the 7th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals. Judge Sykes ruled that the tombstones did not constitute fighting words and were protected under the First Amendment. However, she also ruled that Officer Mason was entitled to qualified immunity, as any reasonable officer would act the same under the circumstances.

The bigger question might be *how* this case made it all the way to the U.S. Court of Appeals. As Judge Sykes wrote in her opinion, "Lawsuits like this one cast the legal profession in a bad light and contribute to the impression that Americans are an overlawyered and excessively litigious people."





# TAKE A BREAK

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# TAILS FROM THE PAST

## Mythical Cats of the World



Most owners will tell you their cats act like ancient deities. Majestic, scrupulous, and utterly unpredictable, these fascinating creatures have long captured our imaginations. Even before cat videos took the internet by storm, humans have been idolizing felines, placing them alongside some of their most important mythological figures.

### Bastet — Egypt

Of course, a list of mythical cats has to start with Egypt. While many people know the pharaohs and their followers thought cats were sacred, you may be surprised by how deep the connection goes. The earliest depiction of Bastet, the feline deity of protection, is a lion-headed woman in battle. But, over the course of 2,000 years, Bastet evolved to resemble the domesticated, pointy-eared cats we know and love today.

### 招き猫 (Maneki-Neko) — Japan

Legend has it that in the 17th century, a monk living in a small temple in Edo (now Tokyo) was struggling to survive, but he still split his meals with his cat, Tama. One day, Lord Nakaota Ii got caught in a rainstorm while hunting and took shelter under a tree near the temple. Nakaota spotted Tama near the temple, and the cat raised its leg, beckoning the noble to come toward him. Curious, Nakaota complied, stepping out from beneath the tree just before a bolt of lightning struck it down. The lord's life was saved, and to this day, the Maneki-Neko (the beckoning cat) is a symbol of wealth and good fortune.

### Freya's Skogkatts — Norway

In Norse folklore, the goddess Freya had a unique means of travel: a chariot pulled by two cats. These were skogkatts, or Norwegian Forest cats, that were only a little larger than your average house cat. Still, these small felines towed Freya around battlefields as she gathered warriors to send to Valhalla. On top of being the goddess of war, love affairs, and magic, Freya may well have been Midgard's first cat lady.



## LEFTOVER CANDY SNACK MIX

*Inspired by Food & Wine Magazine*

### Ingredients

- 2 cups mini pretzels, coarsely broken
- 1/4 cup light brown sugar
- 2 tbsp granulated sugar
- 1/3 cup dry milk powder
- 6 tbsp unsalted butter, melted
- 12 oz mini candy bars, such as Snickers, chopped into 1/2-inch pieces

### Directions

1. Heat oven to 275 F.
2. In a large mixing bowl, fold together pretzels, sugars, milk powder, and butter.
3. Spread mixture on a baking sheet lined with parchment paper and bake for 20 minutes.
4. Let cool for at least 30 minutes and mix in candy bar pieces before serving.



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## DON'T LET MONEY GET IN THE WAY Of Your Grandchild's Education

College expenses aren't what they used to be. What used to be affordable to any student with a part-time summer job now can take years to pay off. If your grandkids want to go to college, the cost of education should not be a barrier to their future. Luckily there are ways that you can help ease that financial burden.

### Invest in a 529 Plan.

There are no limits on age, income, or monetary contributions attached to this college savings account, and contributions are tax-deductible in some states. Just like a Roth IRA, the earnings grow over time and can be used tax-free for qualifying expenses, like tuition and room. There are a few downsides, however. Funds from a grandparent's 529 Savings Plan are considered student income and could hurt your student's eligibility for financial aid. If you choose to fund through a parent's 529 Plan, which doesn't count as student income, you lose control over the funds you contribute.



### Pay their tuition.

Not everybody has \$20,000 just lying around, but if you do, using it to pay for your grandchild's tuition isn't a bad way to spend it. Normally, annual financial gifts that are exempt from the federal gift tax can't exceed \$15,000, but payments toward someone's tuition, for any amount, are not taxed. Keep in mind, however, that the money can only go toward tuition, not toward other college expenses like room and board or textbooks.

### Help them find opportunities to save.

Even if you don't have thousands of dollars to give, you can still help your grandkids look for other opportunities to save. There are thousands of available scholarships, grants, and programs to help students pay for college, and helping them look online and in your community can go a long way.

College could be your grandchild's first stop on the path to achieving their dreams. You can be a part of that journey by making sure money doesn't get in the way of that.