

**A STELLAR JOURNEY**  
**BY MARK SWINDLE AND LEIGH BIENEN**

Imagine yourself with the task of providing evidence for the first of Newton's three laws of motion...

*Objects at rest tend to remain at rest.*



*Prof. emer. Leigh Bienen*

...yet your focus is on Voyagers I and II, both launched in 1977, and traveling at speeds of ~35,000 miles/hour.

The absurdity of doing so is not unlike that of *focusing on the creative engagements of NEO members in their emeritus years*—when the emerita under scrutiny is one Leigh Buchanan Bienen— who only *last year* decided to retire—more than 6 decades into her career.

Pre-retirement

~15 years *before* the Voyager launched, Leigh, her husband, Henry, and their 3 young daughters were in Nigeria, where she discovered the handwritten records of 114 homicide cases in a tiny attic room above the State Supreme Court in Lagos.

*Public executions in the bay at Lagos were attended by thousands; parents held children up to see, and to hear the last words...Sharks cleaned up the mess.*

Applying skills honed from studies at Cornell, MIT, and the Iowa's Writers Workshop (and rudiments of academic data collection and statistical analysis learned from the University of Ibadan), she published the results of her studies in two of the first of her 30 [legal essays](#), 3 [book reviews](#), 4 [books](#), 12 [literary essays](#), and 48 [citations](#) (including the Supreme Court) authored over her prolific career.

*Most important, however, was that I had found the territory—murder, capital punishment, and the vagaries of the law—which would absorb me for the next several decades.*

The family settled in Princeton from 1966-1994. As Henry rose through the ranks from Assistant Professor to Dean of the Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs, Leigh authored more than 20 publications; roved about as Lecturer between Berkeley, Princeton, the University of Pennsylvania; and expanded her focus, during her tenure as Assistant Deputy Public Defender in New Jersey, from murder and capital punishment (which the State had reinstated in 1982) to rape and sexual assault, whose definitions were in flux.

As the Voyagers swept past the outer planets, the family's trajectory abruptly shifted, too: in 1995 [Henry Samuel Bienen](#) began his 14-year tenure as President of Northwestern University. And for Leigh:

*In Chicago, to my profound and continuing surprise, I found myself in the middle of a hotbed of politics and advocacy about death penalty prosecutions in Illinois.*

First, a 1998 Chicago Tribune [article](#) alerted her to the existence of ~11,400 handwritten records of Chicago Homicides between 1870-1930. Rather than dying in a subterranean repository, it became the basis for the [Chicago Historical Homicide Project](#), and her first website, [Homicide in Chicago, 1870-1930](#). With more than 1.5M visitors since its launch in 2004, this is perhaps the work Leigh is best known for.

Its supporting material, including [Hull House Maps and Papers](#) (authored by Florence Kelley and her colleagues) provided a slingshot effect. Florence arrived in Chicago precisely a century before Leigh. Leigh's website, [Florence Kelley in Chicago 1891-1899](#), plus what is in the book, [Florence Kelley and the Children: Factory Inspector in 1890s Chicago](#), combine to resuscitate the astounding body of work of this Jane Addams' Hull House luminary.

Then, as member of the Illinois Committee to Study the Reform of the Death Penalty, Leigh collected data determining that between 2000-2010 more than \$100 million of state money was spent out of the Capital Litigation Trust Fund on death penalty cases. This helped lead to the abolition of the death penalty in 2011; and to a third website, [Illinois Murder Indictments 2000-2010](#) (2014). This was followed in 2016 by a fourth, Illinois Judges 2015, a compilation of all judges sitting as of 2015; and finally [2003 Chicago Murders](#) (2020), a snapshot of the Kafkaesque bureaucracy applied to 140 death eligible murders in Cook County in the first half of 2003.

### Retirement

Leigh's creative focus has continued unabated, including an autobiography—*The Autobiography of Henry Bienen* (in progress)—and an archival/legacy website collecting her publications, 27 videos and 9 websites, [Leigh Buchanan Bienen: Works](#).

As the Voyagers venture further into interstellar space, intriguingly Leigh seems to be bending the space-time continuum—speaking to us in the voice of [Florence Kelley: Live from 1890s Chicago!](#) providing lucid-if-unnerving insights into how little human behavior has changed since then; and of how vital it remains to act with courage and dedication to making the world a better place.

**New Bios!** Thank you to NEO members, [Bob Gundlach](#), [Phyllis Lassner](#), [Arthur Schmidt](#) and [Bayar Thimmappa](#) for sharing their biographies for the NEO website. [Use our Bio form](#) to share yours or email [emeritus-orq@northwestern.edu](mailto:emeritus-orq@northwestern.edu).



*Combining physics and fun with  
Prof. emer. Schmidt.*