

****FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE****

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The Perlmutter Center for Legal Justice at Cardozo Law Announces Client Deda Margilaj Has Been Pardoned by Michigan Governor Gretchen Whitmer

NEW YORK, NY — The Perlmutter Center for Legal Justice at Cardozo Law (PCLJ) is pleased to announce that its client, Deda Malota Margilaj, was granted a full pardon by Michigan Governor Gretchen Whitmer on July 2, 2026. The pardon erases Mr. Margilaj's nearly fifty-year-old conviction and clears the way for the termination of the removal proceedings that threatened to deport him from the only country he has called home since childhood. Mr. Margilaj, 74, who arrived in the United States as a teenage refugee in 1970 and has been an engaged member of his community for over 50 years, can now remain with his wife, five children, eight grandchildren, and vast extended family.

Mr. Margilaj left Albania alone at age 17, ultimately arriving in Detroit, Michigan with nothing but a relentless work ethic. In 1975, he was a small business owner when he was arrested and charged with second-degree murder for the death of a man he shot while defending his brother, who had been shot by the same man. He was convicted in 1978 following a second trial, after the first ended in a hung jury, and was sentenced to seven to 15 years in prison. He served four and a half years, spending the entirety of his incarceration in the prison's Trustee Division reserved for low-risk individuals, earning his GED, and holding long-term work assignments, before his early release for good behavior in 1982. He was discharged from parole in 1984 and has not been arrested or convicted of any offense in the more than forty years since.

In the decades that followed, Mr. Margilaj built a life his family and community describe as the embodiment of the American dream. He worked for twenty years as a union superintendent in New York City while running a small construction business. With Tereze, his wife of 49 years, he raised five children, and became a father figure to many others in his extended family and community. In retirement, he opened Noshi's Coney Island restaurants in Poughkeepsie and New Paltz, New York, a nod to his Michigan roots. He is a devoted member of Our Lady of Shkodra Church in Hartsdale, New York, and a pillar of the Albanian-American community in the Hudson Valley.

When immigration rules changed in 1996, placing him at risk of deportation due to his 1978 conviction, Mr. Margilaj stopped traveling abroad to see his family, out of fear that these actions could trigger immigration proceedings. During those years, he lost both his mother and father, and was unable to return to bury them.

Mr. Margilaj's fears proved well founded: In 2024, he was placed in removal proceedings based on the 1978 conviction. His petition to Governor Whitmer was supported by dozens of letters from family members, friends, community members, and law enforcement officers, all attesting to his character and central place in his family and community. Mr. Margilaj was represented in his petition by the Perlmutter Center for Legal Justice.

"I came to this country with nothing, and it gave me everything — my wife, my children, my grandchildren, my work. All I ever wanted was to stay with my family in the country I love. Now, thanks to Governor Whitmer, for the first time in decades, I am not afraid," said Mr. Margilaj.

"Now more than ever, this case demonstrates the power of executive clemency to correct the lifelong collateral consequences of decades-old convictions," said Joshua Dubin, Executive Director of the Perlmutter Center for Legal Justice. "Thanks to Governor Whitmer, Mr. Margilaj will be able to do what he enjoys the most — spend time with his family and friends, free of the fear that has limited his life for so many decades."

Mr. Margilaj's case highlights the immigration consequences that can follow a conviction, even one for which a person fully completed their sentence more than four decades ago. It also demonstrates the unique role executive clemency can play in delivering justice where the legal system otherwise offers no recourse. Governor Whitmer's grant recognizes what Mr. Margilaj's family asked her to see: decades of rehabilitation, contribution, and service to the communities of Michigan and New York.

ABOUT THE PERLMUTTER CENTER FOR LEGAL JUSTICE AT CARDOZO LAW

The Perlmutter Center for Legal Justice trains students and lawyers in the proper use of scientific evidence, focusing on the misuse of forensic science that potentially contributes to wrongful convictions. In addition, the Center seeks justice for those individuals incarcerated with excessive sentences through parole work and clemency requests. The Perlmutter Center was established through a \$15-million philanthropic donation from the Laura and Isaac Perlmutter Foundation.

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