

Master Lawyers



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This special edition of the *Michigan Bar Journal* focuses on our esteemed master lawyers. Our Master Lawyers Section¹ may not have made as showy a media splash as our new Marijuana Law Section when it was formed, but it is big news in my book. The section's members have institutional and legal knowledge not found in forms or law books. They have the gift of hindsight, which cannot be purchased at any price. They are an invaluable treasure.

In this column, I share with you how master lawyers have helped me and ask them to consider ways they can help the legal profession address the twenty-first century challenges lawyers face. As you read this column, please pause for a moment and think of the master lawyers who have helped you along the way. Maybe they are no longer with us, but their memory lives on in how you conduct your practice and yourself. Maybe they are still practicing, and this article prompts you to pick up the phone or send an e-mail to catch up with them. Gratitude for those who gave their valuable time to help you soothes the soul.

Monika Sacks, one of my law partners, and Margaret ("Margo") Nichols, who recently became of counsel to our firm, are two of the many master lawyers who helped

me build a successful practice and inspired me to become State Bar president. When I shifted my practice 15 years ago to matrimonial law following 10 years of practicing insurance defense, landlord-tenant, debt collection, and construction lien law, I needed to develop the challenging skills of connecting on a deeply personal level with clients of varying personalities while firmly maintaining the strong boundaries required by professionalism.

To deliver respectful, unbiased counseling to clients who are in the midst of personal crises takes courage, wisdom, and patience—traits that may not come easily, but can be taught and developed. Monika and Margo allowed me to participate in initial client interviews and witness firsthand their skilled application of these traits. I would silently gasp over the shocking information clients confided in them and marvel as they guided these clients reassuringly, firmly, diplomatically, and realistically, regardless of how hard it was for the clients to hear what they were saying. Over time, I watched their clients grow increasingly capable of hearing their advice, become self-empowered, and, by the end of their cases, appear positive, healthier, and happier. Neither younger lawyers nor clients can buy this type of education off the Internet, nor can Silicon Valley write software duplicating it (yet).

Margo and Monika also taught me the value of connecting with State Bar leadership and encouraged me to become an officer of the Bar. They believed, altruistically and correctly, that the profession needs committed leaders even more than a firm needs each lawyer billing full tilt all year, every year. I hope all firms that have the opportunity to offer such support to a colleague seize it with gusto.

Perhaps the best lesson of all has been observing Margo proactively transition to of counsel status. She conscientiously researched what had to be done and led the firm through the process in a dignified, mutually respectful manner. I hope all lawyers who are nearing the close of their practices are so responsible. It has paid off for Margo, who continues to have a vibrant practice (in the office next to mine), serve as president of the Michigan State Bar Foundation, and spend time with her family.

Margo, Monika, and Eileen Slank (almost a "master" as the Bar defines it) formed our family-friendly firm 21 years ago, and today, the firm remains as family-friendly as ever. Our younger associates have little ones who are welcome at the office on unexpected snow and sick days, and Monika works remotely while visiting a burgeoning population of grandchildren. I have spent the last 15 years freely attending our two sons' phenomenal performances with the

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Pioneer High School Symphony Band, baseball games numbering in the hundreds, and taekwondo practices twice a week for 13 consecutive years. I take time to run, practice yoga, and cook basic family dinners. I hope senior lawyers in law firms small and large model the value of family and self-care; doing so, I believe, minimizes turnover that drains profitability.

Now comes the part where I offer ideas and challenges for members of our Master Lawyers Section:

- If you already signed up to be a mentor on the State Bar website, thank you! If you have not done so, please consider doing so now. Signing up is easy and takes only about five minutes. Simply visit www.michbar.org, click on For Members, Member Services, and Mentor Center, and then follow the prompts to become a mentor. Your profile will include your location, interests, and areas of practice, and will allow mentees to find you if you're a good match.
- Do you belong to a community organization where you could speak on the perils of do-it-yourself legal projects? Consider helping to educate the public about the value of an experienced lawyer

spotting issues and offering creative solutions to problems people may not even know a lawyer can assist with. Remind people that they don't know what they don't know.

- Does your county have a new or young lawyers' section? Contact the section and offer to have a joint session with the master lawyers in your community—something like speed dating, where the new and master lawyers share something they have found to be successful in their practices.
- Do you have a passion for the rule of law? Do you believe that children are our future? Consider teaching about the rule of law in a local school on September 17, which is Constitution Day, or on May 1, which is Law Day. There are ready-made curricula and materials on the State Bar website.²
- Educate yourself about the damage law school debt is doing to the availability of legal services, especially in rural and low-income areas.³ Talk to local non-profit organizations about setting up a loan forgiveness program that makes monthly student loan payments for a year to help new legal aid or rural lawyers get

their financial footing the first year out of law school. Help gather contributions to fund a loan forgiveness program.

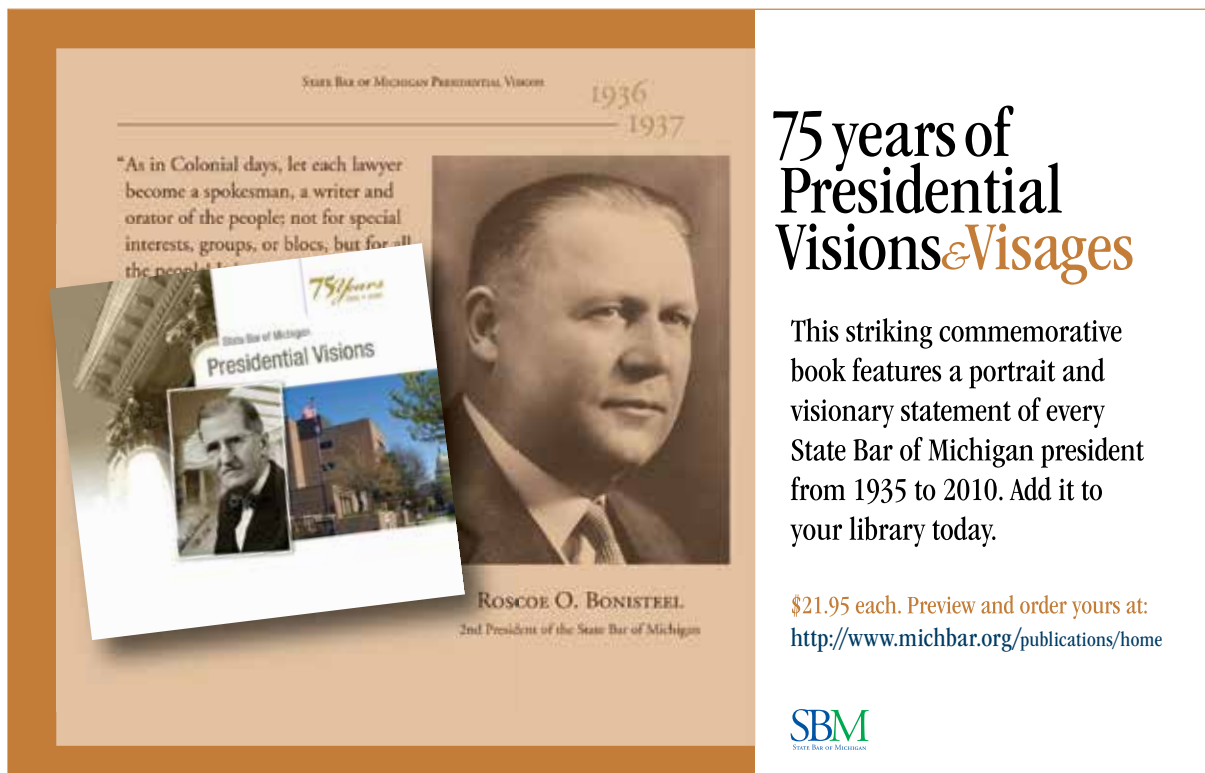
- Offer to take a law school extern for a semester.

I hope you will take full advantage of the Master Lawyers Section to develop and execute ideas for helping our profession meet the challenges of the twenty-first century. Master lawyers have so much to offer and provide an invaluable service to our profession and the public by sharing their incomparable time and talent. ■

Follow me on Twitter @LoriBuiteweg

ENDNOTES

1. The Master Lawyers Section was formed in 2010 and is free to all lawyers with 30 years of practice or who have reached age 60. SBM members in good standing who have reached age 50 or have completed 20 years of membership in the Bar may join the section for \$25 annually. There are approximately 17,200 members of the section, comprising roughly 40 percent of our total active membership.
2. See State Bar of Michigan, *Events and Awards* <<http://www.michbar.org/programs/eventsawards#events>> (accessed September 17, 2015).
3. See American Bar Association, *Loan Repayment Assistance Programs* <http://www.americanbar.org/groups/legal_aid_indigent_defendants/initiatives/loan_repayment_assistance_programs.html> (accessed September 17, 2015).



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