

# "Champion of the Downtrodden"

By Lynn Patrick Ingram

Larry Nolan is a competitor and a winner.

Those aren't my words. They belong to Thomas E. Brennan, former Supreme Court chief justice and Thomas M. Cooley Law School founder, who told me recently that there's only one thing I need to know about Nolan, the incoming State Bar president.

"When he was in high school, he came late to a track meet and still won the race running barefoot," Brennan recalled.

Nolan's good friend and fellow State Bar Commissioner Don Rockwell shared Brennan's sentiments.

"Larry is a fighter," he said, pointing all the way back to Larry's amateur hockey days.

"He was described as a 'feisty' hockey player," Rockwell noted. "And it appears that this feisty nature has not left him."

According to Rockwell, Nolan's feistiness has always been used for good and has served him well as a lawyer.

"Throughout his career, Larry has represented parties who have been seriously

"I knew that one of the highest callings was to a profession where you could help people and actually make a difference in someone's life.

I never envisioned myself doing anything else other than practicing law."

—*State Bar President Larry Nolan*

injured by wrongful and negligent conduct and who have been left with drastically different lives," he said.

In fact, Nolan has always been there for those in need, no matter the time or place. At 13 or 14 years old during a summer vacation in Massachusetts, he dove into a river to pull a drowning boy to shore, saving his life.

"He needed my help, so I dove in," Nolan recalled.

That's simply who he is.

## "Living the dream"

Nolan's character is clearly a reflection of his strong upbringing.

His father was born in Belfast, Ireland, but moved to Quebec at an early age and eventually settled in Windsor, Ontario. His mother was born in Canada and grew up in Windsor. The couple met there and moved to Detroit.

Nolan was born in Detroit and moved to Farmington at an early age. Despite this, his soul remained imprinted with the "Canadian hockey gene," and he grew up playing

the sport he says became an obsession. He recalls spending entire days playing hockey with his friends on a pond in his neighborhood.

"We lived and breathed hockey until the warm days of spring arrived and robbed us of our treasured rink," he said.

Nolan also developed a love of fishing, thanks to his father, who would "always make it a point" to take two or three weeks off during the summer to take the family up north.

"I learned the love of fishing up north and have never forgotten those wonderful days on the lakes in northern Michigan," he recalled.

Meanwhile, Nolan says the biggest moment of his life was when he met his wife, Laurel, during his final semester of law school.

"She was instantly and still remains my best friend, soul mate, and life compass for all that is good and important in my life," he said.

"Laurel and her mother and father were the best things ever to occur in my life," Nolan said. "My mother-in-law, Avis, would always tell me I was the son they never had.



TWO WESTERN STANDOUTS

Left to right: Harold Michalies, goalie; and Larry Nolan, center; 1969 Western Michigan University Hockey

My father-in-law, Lou, genuinely loved me and became my other best friend."

"He was absolutely the greatest guy to spend time with," he recalled. "He became my surrogate father after my father passed away at age 79 when I was 34. Our relationship lasted more than 31 years until he passed away more than 10 years ago."

Nolan and his wife were blessed with two children: Bridget, a well-respected psychologist in Kalamazoo; and Lawrence Patrick Jr. (Patrick), a doctor finishing his third year of residency in Florida. They are also expecting their first grandchild, a boy, due soon to Bridget and her husband, Eric.

"I see hockey skates and fishing equipment in his future," Nolan predicted.



Lou Blasi and Laurel Blasi—Nolan's "two best friends"

### The dream, continued...

Nolan's dream extended into his law practice.

"I started my own practice in 1976 because being a trial lawyer was the only thing I ever wanted to do," he said. "I knew that one of the highest callings was to a profession where you could help people and actually make a difference in someone's life. I never envisioned myself doing anything else other than practicing law. So, whenever I ask someone, 'How are you doing?' and they respond, 'Living the dream!,' I immediately think of how true that actually is for me."

Nolan quickly settled into an office "on the banks of the beautiful Grand River downtown next to the post office" in Eaton Rapids, where he's been ever since.

Early on, he took criminal appointments and whatever legal work he could get from the locals. Eventually, he became one of the best plaintiff personal-injury and wrongful-death lawyers in the state, working tirelessly, as always, to protect those in need.

"One particular defense counsel referred to me as the 'Champion of the Downtrodden,' a title I hold dear," he noted.

Nolan also felt a great need to give back, which is why he volunteered with multiple bar associations, boards, charities, and other organizations, culminating with his impending State Bar presidency.

"Being elected as the 82nd president of the State Bar of Michigan... is the biggest accomplishment in my bar association career," he said.

### In good hands

So what's next on the agenda?

Nolan says his goals for his year as president are simple: to promote and push forward the great work done by his predecessors with the 21st Century Practice Task Force Report and the Diversity and Inclusion Advisory Committee (DIAC), to promote pro bono, and to leave the Bar better than he found it.



Laurel and Larry at the Breslin Center in East Lansing

Along with his immediate predecessor, Lori Buiteweg, Nolan was deeply involved in the work of the 21st Century Practice Task Force, which was started by former State Bar president Tom Rombach and chaired by former presidents Julie Fershtman and Bruce Courtade. More than 150 attorneys, judges, legal educators, and administrators spent



Photo by Kristina Bird

The Nolan family at the 2016 SBM Annual Meeting. Left to right: Eric Rohs, Bridget Blasi Nolan Rohs, Laurel Blasi, Lawrence P. Nolan, and Dr. L. Patrick Nolan.

countless hours during an intensive year-long process examining how the State Bar can best serve the public and support lawyers in the face of a rapidly evolving profession.

The task force ultimately developed a report identifying five key problems the legal profession must address, and visions and key innovations necessary to overcome the problems. The problems are:

- A dysfunctional legal marketplace
- Significant issues for new lawyers and new challenges for experienced lawyers
- Inefficient and overly complex legal processes
- Regulatory hurdles
- Cultural resistance to innovation

The task force made great progress during its year of operation, which Nolan said he intends to continue.

"We face the comprehensive task of giving real meaning to those issues that were identified," he said.

He also intends to continue his work with his co-chair, Judge Cynthia Stephens, on the DIAC, with a focus on "issues and projects that will welcome *all* members of our bar association to the table. We need to continue to respect and listen to members of diverse backgrounds."

Nolan credited former president Tony Jenkins with giving the State Bar's diversity and inclusion efforts a more prominent place at the table, noting that "we can only become stronger through a wider and more diverse representation of our membership."

"The only thing constant in this world is change, and only that change that will benefit everyone must be embraced," he said. "We have a chance to be leaders in that regard."

Nolan said he also plans to continue the State Bar's excellent pro bono efforts, noting he hopes to "instill a sense of public service" and the need to give back through pro bono.

"We have the ability to close or narrow the widening gap between those who can

afford our legal services and those who can't," he said.

Ultimately, Nolan said State Bar members can be confident that the organization will look different, in a good way, at the end of his year as president.

"I would like to leave office with the ability to say that the Bar is in better shape and the public is being better served by the work done under my leadership," he said.

Clearly, Nolan has set a high bar for himself and has a lot of work ahead of him. But those who know him best say we can rest assured we're in good hands.

"There is a reason why Larry is called the Fightin' Irishman," Michigan Court of Appeals judge and fellow State Bar Commissioner Michael J. Riordan said. "He is goal-oriented and tenacious." At the same time, Riordan continued, "he is a model of civility and a gentleman in every sense of the word."

Nolan's good friend and former Lansing Legal Eagles hockey club teammate, Jon Cooper, who is now head coach of the NHL's Tampa Bay Lightning, said, "If Larry was half as good at hockey as he is at being a lawyer, he would have played in the NHL."

Rockwell said achieving the many goals Nolan has laid out for himself will take "consistent dedication and effort," but noted "Larry is up to the task."

Former Chief Justice Brennan summed it up this way:

"I don't know exactly what his goals will be as State Bar president, but I wouldn't bet a lot against his achieving them."

With Nolan's track record, who would? ■

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