

A Gentleman and a Scholar

By Lynn Patrick Ingram

Q. What do you get when you cross a gentleman lawyer and a science nerd?

A. A traditional, yet futuristic, perspective on the legal profession.

That's what State Bar of Michigan President Donald G. Rockwell is bringing to the table starting this month.

Rockwell is considered by many to be a throwback to the more formal days of the legal profession—a lawyer who genuinely respects the law, the courtroom, the decorum, the process, and his opponent.

But he is also considered progressive, innovative, forward thinking, even scientific in his approach, which his friends, colleagues, and Rockwell himself say should not surprise anyone.

"I love to think about the physical universe, and this comes from my undergraduate major in physics at the University of Michigan–Flint," Rockwell said. "What is important to me is the sense of true wonder when I contemplate these matters and how we, the human race, are just an infinitesimally small part of this great and interesting universe."

A traditionalist who majored in physics? What does this mean for the legal profession?

Perhaps it means we are about to get the perspective of a State Bar president who believes that the future of the profession lies in the past.

Wouldn't that be something?

According to Phil Swann, Rockwell's longtime friend and one-time law partner who also clerked with him for two different Genesee County judges, that's exactly what we're going to see.

"I think his tenure as president will emphasize collegiality among attorneys and judges to work toward just and fair resolutions for people who find themselves in the

court system or simply in a lawyer's office," Swann said. "That includes respect for the law and each other. Too often, civility that should be shown, whether by a judge or an attorney, breaks down into petty squabbles."

Is this guy for real?

Many who meet Rockwell for the first time are left wondering whether his kind, caring, dignified, gentlemanly nature is just an act.

Those who know him well, though, say it's anything but.

"Don is never disingenuous," Swann said. "People who don't know him well have asked me if he is really as nice and sincere as he appears to be, and I have told them that what you see on first meeting him is the way he is whether in a public or private setting. He is genuine."

Another longtime friend of Rockwell's, 67th District Court Judge Mark McCabe, agreed.

"I have never seen him lose control of his temper or be anything but a gentleman to everyone he comes in contact with," McCabe said.

According to fellow Genesee County attorney Francine Cullari, Rockwell is "the ultimate gentleman lawyer."

"His presence is calming, his words are always well-measured, he is funny, he does not aggrandize himself, he supports others, he is highly competent, he does the right thing when others are not willing to do so, [and] better yet, he convinces them of the right action," she said. "Above all, he is kind."

His friends and colleagues also say he is an eternal optimist.

"He finds something good in everyone," Swann said. "I'm sure there must be exceptions, but I have never heard him express



Don and Diane Rockwell


them. It is not a naive optimism, but rather a clear-eyed character trait that I have witnessed over and over."

McCabe says this strength of character really stands out.

"I have seen him in both good times and bad," he said. "Of course, everyone can happily accept the results when things go well, including Don. When things don't go so well, I have personally witnessed Don accepting whatever was dealt to him and actually reassuring those around him that everything would eventually work out."

Rockwell's wife, Diane, who has witnessed this firsthand during their 42 years of marriage, agreed, noting his honesty and high ethical standards have benefited not just his clients and colleagues, but everyone around him.

"His ethical standards are not only present in his profession but also in his daily life as a husband, father, and friend," she said.



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—*Friend and former law partner Phil Swann*

Rockwell Fast Facts

Education: University of Michigan–Flint (physics, with distinction); University of Detroit Mercy School of Law (law, cum laude)

Practice Areas: Products liability, employment, business, personal injury, patent, trademark, and copyright (he is a licensed patent attorney); mediator, arbitrator, case evaluator, and umpire; counsel for Kettering University; former Genesee County judge (67th District Court)

Association/Volunteer Service:

State Bar of Michigan (current president and former member of both the Board of Commissioners and Representative Assembly); Genesee County Bar

Association (past president); American Inns of Court Centennial Chapter (past president); University of Michigan–Flint Alumni Society (founding member and first president); Rotary Club of Flint (past president); Community Dispute Resolution Center (volunteer); Flint Township Civil Service Commission (current president); Carriage Town Ministries (board member and secretary)

Family: Married (Diane) with two children (Greg, 35, and Susan, 33) and one grandchild (Violet, 2)

Hobbies: Golfing, biking, watching old movies, and listening to a variety of music

"Don has always told our children to do the right thing and tell the truth. He encouraged them to be critical thinkers."

Rockwell said he brings this approach to everything he does and everyone he meets.

"I make it a point when talking to law students and younger lawyers to say that in my opinion, all great lawyers have one thing in common: they are driven to do the right thing regardless of the circumstances," he said. "I have had the benefit of being around many great lawyers and I simply recognize that my clients and I will be best off trying to emulate this common attitude."

Fellow Genesee County attorney Torchio Feaster, who was clerking at the Genesee County Probate Court when he met Rockwell, said he has always admired Rockwell's ability and professionalism and has been privileged to have him as a resource.

"Mr. Rockwell is an excellent attorney," Feaster said. "He is dedicated to the

profession and he's always willing to lend a little help to a new attorney and provide some direction."

A scholar

In addition to his calm, gentle, easygoing nature, Rockwell is also a fierce and zealous advocate, a sharp and well-prepared lawyer, and a deep and strategic thinker.

"As a lawyer, Don is prepared and always has a complete understanding of the facts and the law," McCabe said. "He is

very deliberative and never rushes to judgment. In the end, these abilities have served him well."

Swann agreed.

"Don, first and foremost, is always working toward a fair and just outcome," he said. "I know that sounds trite, but it is how he is as a person. He always makes a fair demand on any opponent to resolve matters. He never puts his interests or ego above the problem at hand."

However, he is also "tough and forceful when he needs to be," Swann added.

"Don is a true advocate for justice and a mentor we can all look up to and emulate."

—**Genesee County attorney
Michael Tesner**

Fellow Genesee County lawyer Michael Tesner also praised Rockwell for his "fairness, civility, professionalism, and ethical approach" to the practice of law.

"Don is a zealous advocate for his clients, but at the same time is a strident champion of the legal system as a whole," Tesner said. "His long-tenured involvement with the Genesee County Bar Association and the State Bar of Michigan is a testament to his ideals, and through his years of service and leadership he has helped to make our profession better. Don is a true advocate for justice and a mentor we can all look up to and emulate."

Swann said Rockwell is just as brilliant in the areas of science and physics, which he studied in college and still enjoys.

"I once asked Don if he could help me determine the amount of liquid propane, when converted to a gas, that would escape from a quarter-inch tube at a certain pressure in a 15-minute span," he recalled. "Don had an answer within a few minutes. My own retained PhD engineers could not give me an answer that made any sense. The opponent's expert agreed with Don's calculations and the matter was settled in my client's favor."

Steering and cheering

Despite Rockwell's brainy hobbies and intellect, he said he plans to keep it simple during his tenure as State Bar president.

"We belong to a wonderful state bar with a great staff and great volunteer leaders who are developing and implementing leading-edge programs," he said. "Many of these programs are the result of thousands of hours of very hard work undertaken by the 21st Century Practice Task Force, which rendered its detailed report last year. Our recently adopted Strategic Plan is in large part an adoption of the task force report.



Don, Diane, Greg, and Susan Rockwell

My year as president can best be described as an effort to continue to steer the course we are on."

With that being said, if there is one particular area Rockwell is personally passionate about, it is access to justice.

"It is clear that access to justice is a problem that has been with us long before the twenty-first century and will be a major problem into the indefinite future," he said. "It is my hope that I can partner with the Michigan State Bar Foundation to get the word to our colleagues that we have a moral, financial, and personal obligation to close the gap. It is my belief that the technology revolution will play a key supporting role in rendering representation for those who otherwise cannot afford an attorney."

Otherwise, Rockwell said he plans to steer and cheer, noting the words of a former State Bar president that have always resonated with him.

"I am reminded when I first saw Dennis Archer when he was president," he recalled. "He said something that has remained with me—he wanted to tell our members what a great profession we are and how important our work is for our society. The word I remember most is 'cheerleader,' and that is one way he saw himself. I share his belief in our profession and in our system of justice, and I will strive to be a cheerleader for our members. They deserve it."

Rockwell's wife said State Bar members can rest assured they are "in good hands" with him as president, noting he "considers his presidency such an honor and privilege."

True to his personality, Rockwell said he is just "a kid from Flint" and merely one member of the State Bar.

"Our colleagues should know that I am simply one of the 45,000-plus members, and that no undertaking can progress forward without the dedication and work of the many," he said. "I have a steadfast belief in the absolute commitment of our members to the improvement of our system of justice and, ultimately, in the basic human sense of fairness for all."

"Over my 40-plus years as an attorney, I have seen remarkable instances of selfless dedication to clients and to the system. This summer, more than 500 members volunteered to serve on SBM committees—so many that we were unable to immediately place everyone who volunteered. That is commitment."

Spoken like a true gentleman and scholar. ■

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