

The Measure of the Man

Tom Rombach aims to bring “wholeness” to the State Bar

By Lynn P. Ingram

Upon receiving an award in 1945 for his passionate quarterback play at Dartmouth, Meryll Frost famously said, “They say behind every great man there’s a woman. While I’m not a great man, there’s a great woman behind me.”

This begs the question: Was incoming State Bar President Tom Rombach actually Meryll Frost in a previous life?

Who knows? But they certainly talk the same. And, according to his friends, he was one heck of an athlete growing up.

Rombach has accomplished so much in his life and career but takes credit for so little. Instead, he credits those around him, especially his wife, Bonnie, without whom he said he would not be here.

Why? Because, as Bonnie can attest, he is a “fierce advocate” for everyone, “but humble when it comes to himself.”

These qualities will serve him well as the State Bar’s 80th president. More importantly, they will serve its members well.



Tom and his wife, Bonnie, at the ABA President’s Reception at the Boston Public Library in August 2014.

A twenty-first-century lawyer

Rombach takes the helm during a particularly tumultuous time in the Bar’s rich history. He says the right-to-work challenge to the State Bar’s membership is one of the biggest challenges it faces, but not the only one.

As a member of the task force charged with providing recommendations to the Supreme Court, Rombach has already helped provide the kind of perspective that will aid in reunifying the Bar going forward.

“We need a stronger bar, more focused on its core mission of protecting the public,” he said, adding that he’ll steer the bar in that direction by “addressing the needs

of twenty-first-century lawyers and their clients,” “continuing the Bar’s strong work with indigent defense reform,” and “promoting professionalism.”

Of course, he’ll have to do all this while maintaining his solo law practice, a juggling act only a few State Bar presidents have undertaken.

Rombach says it’s actually an advantage for a State Bar president to be a solo practitioner because he knows what the bulk of the members want, has firsthand knowledge of what they need, and has used many State Bar services in his practice.

“I’ve been there,” he said, adding, true to form, that he’ll do what he’s always done

and rely on all the great people who have helped him get here in the first place.

The right man for the job

Still, the quality that may help State Bar members the most is Rombach’s talent as a consensus builder, something his wife and close friends say makes him an effective leader and endears him to everyone.

“He seeks to team build, specifically by seeking out all points of view on an issue when crafting his approach or solution to a problem,” said close friend Dana Warren, former chair of the State Bar’s Representative Assembly. “[He] will know what

battles to choose and when to compromise, hopefully finding consensus between different constituencies in our profession during the debates that will follow. I admire his ability to always be respectful and civil in all situations.”

Another one of Rombach’s longtime friends, 20th District Court Judge Mark Plawecki, agreed.

“He bends over backward to listen to an opposing viewpoint and makes sure all have been heard before making decisions,” he said. “He’ll go the extra mile (or 20) to reach consensus.”

Plawecki said Rombach will also be highly accessible.

“Members can rest assured that Tom will be at every function imaginable, and then a few more, to answer their questions.”

Bonnie Rombach said that’s because he is always seeking “wholeness.”

“When Tom brings people together, he helps facilitate an end result that is better than the individual components,” she said. “That is what a leader does. That is what a leader should do.”

The woman behind the man

Of course, the true “measure of the man” is what he brings to the table as a human being—how he treats others and how far he’ll go to help people.

Rombach wouldn’t be the first to tell you about all the great things he’s done. In fact, he probably wouldn’t tell you at all. But his proud and loving wife will tell you; in the words that follow on the next page, she does just that. Who better than the great woman behind the man to speak to his character?

Based on her words, as well as all the evidence, we are in for a treat this year. ■

Lynn P. Ingram is the publications development manager and a legal editor at the State Bar of Michigan. He is a licensed attorney and the former publisher and editor-in-chief of Michigan Lawyers Weekly. Lynn was the 2007 recipient of the Detroit Metropolitan Bar Association’s President’s Award for his dedication to the legal community.

What Tom Won’t Tell You

Tom Rombach has been giving back to the profession since before he was part of it. As a class senator and eventual Student Bar Association president at Thomas M. Cooley Law School, he got involved early and never looked back.

After law school, he immediately got involved in bar association work, first parking cars at the Macomb County Bar Association’s annual picnic and eventually becoming its first-ever president under the age of 40. He has since chaired the State Bar Representative Assembly and represented his constituents in Macomb and St. Clair counties on the State Bar Board of Commissioners.

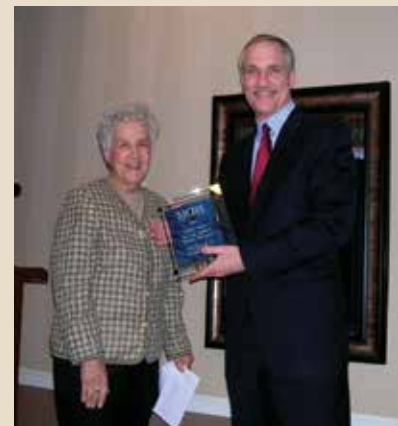
All the while, he has zealously represented his clients and dedicated himself to pro bono service, winning many awards and receiving much recognition along the way.

Tom will never tell you about it, but those who know him say he is selfless, humble, and always looking to improve the profession and make the world a better place.

His wife, Bonnie, said he has dedicated himself to helping others, especially the less fortunate or those who lack the opportunities others enjoy. And, she says, he is eternally grateful to those who have helped him, and expresses this gratitude by paying it forward.

Among Tom’s many professional accomplishments:

- State Bar Representative Assembly chair in 2002–2003
- Member of the National Conference of Bar Presidents and the American Bar Association House of Delegates
- Member of the Macomb County Charter Commission in 2008–2009, which created the role of the county’s executive office
- Former vice chairperson of the Macomb County Board of Commissioners Justice and Public Safety Committee
- Former city/prosecuting attorney for Hazel Park
- Macomb County Outstanding Volunteer Award winner in 2004
- Macomb County Pro Bono Services for Senior Citizens Award winner in 2007
- Macomb County Bar Association’s first Distinguished Public Service Award winner in 2011
- Thomas M. Cooley Law School Alumni Distinguished Service Award winner in 2012
- Macomb County Resolution Center’s Conflict Resolution Advocacy Award winner in 2014



Tom receives the MCBA Pro Bono Services for Senior Citizens Award from Shirley Cushing, director of Macomb County Senior Citizens Legal Assistance Program, in 2007.

A Personal Tribute to Tom

I would like to congratulate my husband, Tom, on becoming the 80th president of the State Bar of Michigan. I am proud of him and what he has accomplished over the years. But more importantly, I am very proud of the person he is.

Tom is the type of person who wouldn't want me to talk about his many accomplishments. I have known him to be a fierce advocate for clients, causes, and organizations (including the State Bar), but humble when it comes to himself. I hope you will allow me the liberty as a proud wife to mention a few of his qualities.

From the moment I met Tom, I could see how engaged he was in making this world a better place. He has volunteered time, effort, and money to causes that have helped groups and individuals, especially those who were less fortunate or did not have the same opportunities or access that many of us do. Some of the groups he has positively impacted along the way include United Way, the American Heart Association, the American Cancer Society, the Interfaith Center for Racial Justice, and the Alliance for the Mentally Ill.

I was drawn to Tom's prodigious intellect (as well as his beautiful blue eyes) and his ability to problem-solve. This has served him well over the years when working on cases that were daunting, and when it seemed impossible to achieve a favorable resolution. Tom has used these skills very successfully for 27 years as an attorney and an advocate for the legal profession. And I have enjoyed the debates we have had—sometimes heated—over the issues of the day. I often learn something from him.

One of Tom's many talents is his power of persuasion. I can attest to this ability—he convinced me to leave a promising career that I loved in San Francisco, a city that I loved, to return to Michigan. Believe me, I am not an easy sell! And I have continued to assist him with his business during 22 years of marriage—no small feat!



The Rombach family at the Detroit Lions vs. San Francisco 49ers game at Ford Field in October 2011. From left to right: Tom's parents, Bob and Marge Rombach; Tom's brother, Scott Rombach; Tom; and Bonnie. (Not pictured is Tom's brother, Patrick Rombach.)

Being a solo practitioner has many challenges, especially when taking on the more than full-time responsibilities of State Bar president. As any solo or small-firm practitioner knows, there are many demands placed on maintaining and building a practice while managing a business. But if anyone is up for the challenge, it's Tom. He is an experienced, skilled practitioner with a tremendous knowledge of the law. He has held many leadership positions over the years. Tom has always enjoyed meeting and talking with people, and he takes time getting to know new people along the way. He is as likely to talk to the clerk at the gas station on a range of topics as he is to talk to the ABA president. Everyone offers value and meaning and something for him to learn. It is one of the reasons I love him.

Tom treats everyone with respect and civility, even those who don't reciprocate. He is happy to lend a hand to people who need help. He remembers where he came



Tom and his brother, Scott, ride to the Pyramids of Giza outside of Cairo, Egypt in December 2009.

from and has always expressed gratitude for the lawyers, judges, and court staff who helped him when he was first beginning his practice. Tom passes this gratitude forward by assisting young lawyers as they navigate the court system in the early days

When he brings people together, he helps facilitate an end result that is better than the individual components. That is what a leader does. That is what a leader should do.

of their careers. He has counseled many seasoned attorneys in professional and personal matters as well.

Attorneys who refer cases to Tom often get glowing feedback from clients about his knowledge of the justice system and ability to achieve successful results. Tom's clients love him. He not only assists them in overcoming their legal difficulties, but he takes an interest in helping them move forward in their lives. He spends a lot of time educating his clients in hopes they will avoid making the same mistakes in the future. In Tom's early days as a lawyer, he was assigned many court-appointed cases. He has always dedicated the same vigorous level of defense as he would for any paying client. Going to trial was, and remains, a viable option for Tom. It is a testament to his skills that he can achieve spectacular results for his clients, often without the necessity of a trial.

Since the time Tom was coached by an attorney in Little League football, he has had an interest in the law. His passion is the legal profession. He seeks to make a contribution to the profession through bar activities. His first introduction to bar politics was as a young lawyer, when he was assigned at a bar picnic to direct drivers on where to park their cars. Needless to say, there were a couple of judges who told Tom where to "park it"! Since then, he has been Macomb County Bar Association Young Lawyers Section chair, Macomb County Bar Association president, State Bar Representative

Assembly chair, and now State Bar president. Over the years, he has encouraged and assisted women and minorities to become involved and seek leadership positions within bar associations. He has championed access to justice to shape a system that works equitably for everyone.

Tom has devoted nearly 40 years volunteering for many organizations, including the State Bar. I can honestly say I don't know anybody who knows more than he does about the State Bar (except Janet Welch, who is exceptional). I know how much it means to Tom to lead the Bar, despite these challenging times. I know how dedicated he



Tom and Bonnie at the Bar Leadership Forum on Mackinac Island in June 2001.

is to preserving its voice. He has always been and will continue to be a champion for the State Bar and the legal profession.

Tom demonstrates integrity and diligence and seeks consensus to create wholeness from a plethora of differing opinions and biases. When he brings people together, he helps facilitate an end result that is better than the individual components. That is what a leader does. That is what a leader should do.

How have I survived all of this? Well, I have been fortunate to have met many wonderful people over the years because of Tom's bar activities. Tom has always told me he doesn't operate in a vacuum. He feels blessed to be surrounded by so many talented, dedicated, intelligent, and altruistic individuals who contribute so much to the legal profession through their bar volunteerism and community activism. Tom is also one of these people, and I admire him and all the rest of the lawyers who give so much.

You could say I am biased in his favor since, after all, I am Tom's wife. But I have also conveyed to you the measure of the man. When my undoubtedly strict, ethnic parents met this guy I was interested in who was *not* from our culture—and they would have preferred I marry someone from our culture—they fell in love with him. Why? Because Tom is a good person with a good heart. In fact, my father jokingly said in his cute little accent before Tom married me, "You are stuck with her now!" And my mother, who now struggles with dementia, remembers Tom but doesn't always remember me. (She really enjoys when he makes her laugh!) There is a reason why my parents wholeheartedly accepted Tom; it is because of the person he is.

I love you, Tom, and I wish you a wonderful, productive year as president of the State Bar of Michigan.

—Bonnie George Rombach