

# We Did It Ourselves (With Their Help)



Bruce A. Courtade

**T**he State Bar of Michigan has many outstanding programs—so many, in fact, that some do not get the attention they deserve. One is the “Professionalism in Action” program, which pairs SBM officers, employees, and members of the Bar with first-year law students at each of the state’s law schools for a day. Its purpose is simple: by having “grizzled veterans” speak to the 1Ls about the importance of ethics and professionalism throughout their academic and professional careers, utilizing story problems and case studies in small group settings, the Bar hopes these neophyte members of our profession pattern themselves after the volunteers who give of their own time to benefit others.

I have participated in more than a half-dozen Professionalism in Action sessions since the program began. Most recently, I spoke to incoming 1Ls at Thomas M. Cooley Law School’s Grand Rapids campus on August 30 regarding what professionalism is and why it is so important for lawyers to hold themselves to a higher standard than other professions. Quoting Abraham Lincoln, Martin Luther King Jr., and John F. Kennedy, I reminded the students that of those to whom much is given, much is required; explained to them that their true measure will be determined not in times of comfort and convenience but in times of challenge or controversy; and encouraged them to understand that their character and integrity are vitally important in their quest to be the excellent attorneys we need them to be for the good of our profession and society.

I urged them to respect their adversaries, their clients, our profession, the rules that guide us, and the rule of law, and concluded my address by quoting Atticus Finch from the novel I am sure has launched thou-

sands of legal careers, Harper Lee’s *To Kill a Mockingbird*:

Before I can live with other folks I’ve got to live with myself. The one thing that doesn’t abide by majority rule is a person’s conscience.<sup>1</sup>

Thus, I urged them to be accountable to themselves by not selling our profession *or themselves* short and by keeping their moral compass focused and centered, and to understand that every day—from their first day of law school until their last breath as a lawyer—they have the chance to participate in a great vocation that will give them the opportunity to make someone’s life better.

As I finished my comments and began to introduce the session’s keynote speaker, William W. Jack Jr. from Smith, Haughey, Rice & Roegge, I realized that as much as I am sure the students were hanging on my every word (did I mention that I spoke at 2 p.m. on the last afternoon before they broke for Labor Day?), it would have been much easier to tell them about Bill—his distinguished career, outstanding accomplishments, the manner in which he carries himself, how he has given back to his community and our profession throughout his nearly 40 years as a lawyer, how humble he is despite his great successes, and how highly regarded he is among those seeking someone to mediate cases because of the esteem in which he is held by plaintiff and defense lawyers alike. Bill is a consummate professional, a credit to our profession, and a true gentleman.

Fortunately, our profession is made up of numerous individuals who, like Bill Jack, are outstanding lawyers and wonderful people, and it has been my good fortune to work with several of them during my tenure on the State Bar’s Board of Commissioners. Many, like my good friend and immediate predecessor Julie Fershtman, have

gone on to become outstanding presidents of this organization. They make extraordinary sacrifices for our profession and are honored for it; those who have served as Bar presidents have had their photos on the cover of this publication and been lauded across the state, and their efforts have been widely publicized by their employers, local bars, legal periodicals, and others. For all they have done, they deserve our thanks and admiration.

But there is another group of servant leaders—elected or appointed members of the Board of Commissioners—who for one reason or another do not become State Bar officers and do not receive the recognition that comes with that path. These men and women make this sacrifice not for personal gain or benefit, but because they love and respect our profession. Month after month, they take time away from their busy personal lives, families, and professional obligations to devote their talents, creativity, and energy to the State Bar and its members.

As I begin my presidency, our Bar is in great shape. As of July 31, the number of attorney members in good standing increased to 42,558—a net increase of 655 over the prior year—with 1,064 new members joining between October 2011 and the end of July 2012. The State Bar just received the American Bar Association’s Grassroots Advocacy Award in recognition of its national leadership in access to justice and indigent criminal defense initiatives as well as our involvement in the *Crossroads to Justice Task Force Report*, lauded far and wide as one of the finest, forward-thinking studies of our court system and the changes needed to address our modern society and economy. The Bar is offering more (and more useful) programs and services to its members and the public, bearing in mind the words of our first president, Roberts P. Hudson,

who wrote the following in this column during the first year of his presidency, words that remain affixed to the wall of the State Bar building in Lansing: "No organization of lawyers can long survive which has not for its primary object the protection of the public."<sup>2</sup> And we are doing this—offering more to more—without having raised membership dues since 2004.

This success is due to the efforts not only of our past presidents and outstanding State Bar staff led by Janet Welch, but also of individuals whose dedicated service to the Bar may have gone unpublicized but certainly did not go unnoticed by their fellow commissioners and undoubtedly deserves to be acknowledged. I want to introduce you to four immediate past commissioners:

- **Donald E. McGinnis Jr.** is a former president of the Oakland County Bar Association and is as renowned for his quick smile and wit as he is for his outstanding abilities as a family law practitioner. Don provided valuable insight gained through his many years of involvement in his local bar association, as well as his abundant common sense. My fondest memory of Don, though, will always be how proud he was—to the point of becoming slightly choked up—when he introduced his daughter, Maureen, as she began her first term as the Young Lawyers Section representative to the Board of Commissioners, making Don and Maureen the first father-daughter team to serve together on the board in the State Bar's history.
- **David A. Perkins** just finished his second stint on the board, having previously served when he was chair of the Young Lawyers Section. David was the board's unofficial paparazzo, seemingly never more than a few feet away from his camera. As quick with a joke as he is with his camera, David's experience as a magistrate proved invaluable when the board discussed matters relating to the administration of justice, particularly issues pertaining to juvenile justice. And you'll never hear a board member say anything negative about David—at least not until they are sure that all the digital copies of photos he took at the annual

bowling match against the Young Lawyers Section have been permanently deleted and his hard drive scrubbed!

- **Angelique Strong Marks** also just finished a second term on the board, serving first as a leader of the Young Lawyers Section and most recently as an appointee of the Michigan Supreme Court. As general counsel and corporate secretary for Behr America, Inc., Angelique brought to the board the perspective of someone from the corporate world. She also brought a great deal of passion regarding matters of racial bias, equal justice initiatives, and the need for the board to be accountable to its members and the most vulnerable members of our society.
- **Laurin' C. Roberts Thomas** has been a great voice of reason throughout her tenure on the board. Laurin' is known for her bright, wide smile and wonderful laugh. Her expertise in matters regarding parole and prisoners' rights (she served on Michigan's Parole and Commutations Board) was invaluable when the board considered court rule amendments or proposed statutes impacting those areas. Before her first term on the board in 2005–2008, Laurin' was a member of the Representative Assembly. She is also a past president of the David-Dunnings Bar Association in Lansing.

Roughly 8,000 years ago, Chinese philosopher Lao Tzu, the founder of Taoism, wrote, "A leader is best when people barely know he exists, when his work is done, his aim fulfilled, they will say: we did it ourselves." Don, David, Angelique, and Laurin' fit this mold, but I did not want their service to the Bar to go unacknowledged; for it is through their efforts and those of their colleagues on the board, including Immediate Past President Julie Fershtman, that the Bar is in such fine shape today.

Indeed, our Bar depends on willing and able attorneys devoting their time, talent, and energy to help the organization fulfill its mission of protecting the public and serving our members. The latest members to join (or rejoin) the board are Larry Nolan (who was recently elected State Bar treas-

urer, placing him in line to become the SBM's 82nd president in 2016), Hon. Michael Riordan, Maureen McGinnis, and Jules Olsman, who all were elected by State Bar members in their respective districts; Supreme Court appointees Stephen J. Gobbo (who just completed a three-year stint on the board by virtue of his leadership role in the Bar's 150-member Representative Assembly), C. Thomas Ludden, Charles S. Hegarty, and D. Randall Gilmer; Young Lawyers Section Chair-Elect Hope Showein; and Representative Assembly Clerk Vanessa Peterson Williams. I look forward to working with each of them to continue the fine example of servant leadership set by Julie Fershtman, Don McGinnis, David Perkins, Angelique Strong Marks, and Laurin' Roberts Thomas.

In closing, I encourage you to become involved in your local and state bar associations. We are always looking for good-hearted, dedicated individuals willing to give back to the profession. Perhaps four years from now, Larry Nolan might be speaking to a new crop of 1Ls and you will provide the inspiration he needs to show them what it takes to be a member of the greatest profession in the land! ■

## FOOTNOTE

1. Lee, *To Kill a Mockingbird* (New York: Grand Central Publishing, 1988), p 108.
2. Hudson, *Message from the President*, 15 Mich St B J 8 (1936). This quote is well known among those who frequent the State Bar building. However, most do not know the rest of the quote from which this single sentence is pulled. President Hudson finished his thought as follows:

No organization of lawyers can long survive which has not for its primary object the protection of the public. Laws are not made for the benefit of the few. They should be those rules of conduct prescribed by the people themselves, through their properly constituted representatives, for the equal protection of the rights of society in the aggregate. They should apply with equal force to the rich and poor alike, and to the protection of those rights the legal profession must apply itself with integrity, industry and faith.

Your organization is designed not only for the benefit and betterment of its members, but primarily for the public at large who require the services of the profession. . . . It cannot represent the interests of any group or political faith. It must not draw distinctions of color, race or creed. *Id.*

As I take office, 76 years after those words were written, I am struck by how timely they remain, and how vigilant we must be to maintain the ideal expressed therein.