

A Leader from UP NORTH

73rd State Bar President Ronald D. Keefe seeks to bridge attorney ties

By Naseem Stecker

He hails from the “land above the bridge”—the first State Bar president from the Upper Peninsula in nearly 50 years. Marquette’s Ronald D. Keefe knows that he’ll promptly be christened the “yooper president,” but his year at the helm of the State Bar will most certainly also give him an opportunity to show what northerners are made of and to bridge and strengthen ties among attorneys all over the state.

While many of his predecessors came from populous cities like Detroit, Grand Rapids, and Lansing, where more than 93 percent of lawyers practice, Keefe is from an area that accounts for only 1.39 percent of the attorney population. Upper Peninsula attorneys are also scattered over almost one-third of the land area of the entire state. In fact, what’s surprising is that parts of the Upper Peninsula are closer to Minneapolis, Milwaukee, and Chicago than they are to the Detroit metropolitan area.

But Ron Keefe knew from day one that his involvement in State Bar activities was more than a matter of geographical representation. He is quick to point out that “leadership is not just a downstate thing.” In his mind, distance should not stop anyone from participating in bar activities, and he has been a strong advocate for this point of view, urging the 447 active attorneys up north to “be involved.”

Come rain or snow (note that the U.P. can get in excess of 100 inches of snow per year, and records of up to 300 inches of snow or more have been set in many communities, including the Marquette area, where Keefe lives and practices) for the past 12 years, he has actively participated in State Bar Board of Commissioners meet-



From left to right, back: Ron and Marilyn. Second row: Charlie, Benjamin, Bret, Kelly, Thomas, Mallory, and Henry. Seated: Sara, Jordan, Wendy, McKenna, Bonnie, and Amber. Children on laps: Daniel, Avery, and Isabella.

ings and has chaired many committees, including those dealing with member services, professional standards, justice initiatives, and finance. He has also been a commissioner liaison to numerous sections and committees of the Bar and was an elected member of the Representative Assembly from 1995 to 1998.

Keefe grew up in the Muskegon area. As the second eldest child in a Catholic family, he saw that “when you come from a large family that doesn’t have a lot, you learn to share and to work harder to get what you want. That’s essentially what it was like growing up.” Muskegon is also where he

met his wife of 39 years, Marilyn. They have three married sons, Bret, Kelly, and Thomas, and ten grandchildren.

Early in life, he knew that he wanted to be a lawyer. As a high school student, he met and was greatly inspired by legendary attorney Jerry S. McCroskey, a champion of workers’ rights. They were tennis partners, and the friendship made a lasting impact on Keefe. McCroskey was tragically killed in a car accident in 1974, just after Keefe got his first job as an assistant prosecuting attorney in Marquette County. Two years later, Keefe joined Kendricks, Bordeau, Adamini, Chilman and Greenlee P.C., where

he is a shareholder. He is also the Marquette city attorney.

Keefe and many other attorneys up north have had to reinvent themselves to adapt to the changing practice of law. When one area of practice dries up, they seek out a different focus. "For many, many years, I did personal injury litigation work. With tort reform, there's less of that, and we also have larger firms coming from outside now, so I've turned to mediation and municipal work. I've seen lawyers who do workers' compensation turn to estate planning; others have gone back to the divorce or criminal practice where once they were doing personal injury work. It's typical for Upper Peninsula lawyers to move around and change their area of concentration because of need."

Anyone who meets Ron Keefe cannot help but be struck by his unassuming, sincere, and relaxed nature. He has a great sense of humor—except, apparently, when he objected in court once a long time ago that the defense lawyer was causing too much laughter in the courtroom! That defense attorney, William R. Smith, later became his partner at Kendricks, Bordeau. Now semi-retired, Smith has many words of praise for his friend of 34 years. "You can search the state, you won't find a better man than Ron Keefe and that's a fact!" Smith emphasized.

Ron Keefe's current partner, Suzanne Larsen, spoke of his innate honesty and ability to inspire people to want to do better and to do more. "He's not someone who's out there telling you what you have to do or being pushy about it. He really leads by example and is very good at getting different sides to work together."

Keefe knows that each president will be judged by how well he or she served everyone in the legal community—no matter which side of the bridge they come from. As the 73rd president of the State Bar, that's what he wants to be: a leader who is able to listen to all. "I think people in leadership sometimes believe that their opinions are what count, and they're not really listening to what other people have to say or what they think. Even though you may be the leader of the Bar, you don't have all the answers. You didn't get this position because

you know everything. Having the ability to listen and evaluate other opinions is an important quality."

His willingness to listen and mediate is familiar to many in the U.P. Judge Thomas Solka from the 25th Judicial Circuit has known Keefe for over 20 years. "Ron Keefe is widely respected by attorneys and judges throughout the Upper Peninsula. In the 25th Circuit, Ron is almost always selected as a case evaluation panel chair or a facilitative mediator by both plaintiff and defense attorneys. I believe Ron's unique blend of professionalism, courtesy, and a level-headed,

common sense approach to the practice of law led to his unanimous selection for ADR services," Solka said.

Keefe is passionate about mediation for various reasons. "In typical mediation, you get the case fairly early in the process before the parties have spent thousands and thousands of dollars. What I like about it, better than the other ADR methods, is that the parties themselves are going to make the decision. You're not making the decision; all you're going to try and do is to reach a decision that the parties can live with. That's a nice thing. When a judge

Comments About Keefe

I have been working with Ron for 10 years. He was a mentor to me when I first started practicing law and he has always instilled the belief that you need to enjoy it, but you also need to be very ethical, very honest, and to follow the rules and not short cut any of those rules, no matter what. If you can't be honest in your practice and loyal to the practice itself, then it's not really worth doing. No matter how busy he is or what he has going on, Ron always makes sure to take time for his family. His kids are grown, but he has grandkids and his family seems to be so important to him, and I think that's sometimes hard to balance in this day practicing law, but he seems to do that really well. I think that's really great, and it's an inspiration for someone young like me to know that its possible to really be able to have the best of both worlds and not have to sacrifice one life for the other.

Suzanne Larsen

Kendricks, Bordeau, Adamini, Chilman & Greenlee, P.C., Marquette

I've known Ron since he came to town in 1973. I started in this office in 1975. I've been his partner and his friend since I first met him. He is clearly one of the finest lawyers in the state without a doubt. The most honest, the person with the most integrity I have ever met. I would like to reiterate that he is emblematic of the kind of lawyers that we have in the Upper Peninsula, which I think are high-quality lawyers. He'll be a great Bar president—no question about it. You couldn't have picked a better person.

William R. Smith, former partner

Kendricks, Bordeau, Adamini, Chilman & Greenlee, P.C.

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Hon. Thomas L. Solka
25th Judicial Circuit, Marquette

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calls you and thanks you for settling a case that he had set for two days of jury trial, that makes you feel good. Mediation is a great program, and we use it a lot in Marquette and elsewhere in the U.P.”

Although life is a “little less hectic up there and perhaps (in terms of payment) there are not as many zeros to the left of the decimal point all the time, we see the same kind of cases that you see anywhere. There’s a lot of competition for clients, just like everywhere else. The real difference is in the rates charged in the U.P., which are significantly less than in lower Michigan.”

The quality of life is what keeps U.P. lawyers where they are, according to Keefe. Lower Peninsula residents often dream of the lakes, sparkling trout streams, rugged mountains, and shorelines of the picturesque north. “The lawyers are up there because there is so much there that they like—the outdoors, to be able to fish, hunt, sail, ski, and bike. It takes only five minutes to get anywhere in Marquette. You can leave home and be at the ski hill in five to ten minutes.”

As Bar president for 2007–2008, Keefe will be leaving these bucolic surroundings more often. His focus will be the entire population of lawyers and their needs and how he can help improve State Bar programs, services, and benefits. At the same time, he would also like to focus more on a culture of giving back to the community. The idea of a “second season” of service appeals greatly to Ron Keefe. “We’re becoming a grey bar too, just like the rest of the nation, and there are a lot of senior lawyers out there who want to stop practicing, but don’t mind spending the time on pro bono causes.”

Working to raise civic consciousness and stressing the importance of the rule of law to the public is another focus. “We’ve seen too much of people taking the position, ‘I don’t care what the law is. This is what I’m going to do.’ That’s a danger that we have in our society today and I want to stress that the rule of law be reinforced.”

He is interested in exploring the issue of malpractice insurance coverage for all lawyers. “You have to have an insurance pol-



Marilyn and Ron Keefe

icy to drive a car, own a home, etc. But in the practice of law, you are not required to let a prospective client know that you don’t have coverage. I don’t know why it hasn’t been addressed,” Keefe said.

He would also like to figure a way to make the Board of Commissioners a more inclusive body. “Sometimes there is a feeling by board members that all the work is done by the executive committee and that when an issue comes to the entire board, it’s just a matter of rubber stamping approval. Perhaps a smaller subcommittee structure may be helpful. We have done that in the past and with good results.”

Ever mindful of the bigger picture—the rule of law and providing access to the courts for everyone who needs it—Keefe will be a gatekeeper who will work zealously to protect both the interests of lawyers and the citizens they serve. As Judge Solka puts it, “For some attorneys, after 30 years of practicing law, it becomes easy to give in to cynicism or express jaded, and usually incorrect, characterizations of lawyers and our profession. In quite the opposite fashion, it seems the longer Ron practices, the more dedicated he becomes to maintaining and improving the standards of the profession. He is the kind of attorney who makes others feel proud to bear the same mantle and title of attorney at law. The legal community of the Upper Peninsula will share the same pride in one of their own being the leader of our association as we continue to have in another ‘yooper,’ Justice John Voelker, who served on the Michigan Supreme Court.” ■

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