

A Meeting Like No Other



Ronald D. Keefe

I know how enjoyable the Annual Meeting is because I have been going for the past 12 years. It's a time to reunite with friends and colleagues I sometimes see only once a year. It's a time to attend section meetings and get information-packed updates on the law from some of the best lawyers in the state. It's also a time to learn on a deeper level how this State Bar of ours is run, and to meet the people who make it work. If this sounds like eating your green vegetables, think again.

I understand the "green vegetables" perspective because I sensed it from my law partners this year as they prepared to go to my inauguration. Many of them had never been to an Annual Meeting before. They were, of course, happy to travel down to support me at the inaugural luncheon, as they are always supportive. But I don't think their expectations were high for the other Annual Meeting events.

Imagine their surprise. My partners exclaimed each time they saw me that the Annual Meeting was so much more than they had expected. That was due in large part to the pairing of ICLE's Solo and Small Firm Institute with the Annual Meeting this year. With eight lawyers, our firm, like most in Michigan, is a small firm. We gained so much from these programs about the business side of the practice that we could put to use right away. We learned practical tips to be more efficient with our document production and e-mail. We talked to vendors about the law firm's website. We also learned ways to hire, compensate, and manage staff to make sure everyone is working to their highest skill level and productivity. The best part for my partners was being able to discuss and brainstorm about these ideas at the end of the day over dinner in

the spectacular setting of the Amway Grand; it was almost like a mini law-firm retreat. My partners came back from the Annual Meeting energized and ready to get back into the office. I am certain other attendees had similar experiences. Attendance was greatly increased at our Annual Meeting this year, thanks to our partnership with ICLE's Solo and Small Firm Institute, so expect this pairing to continue into the future and make plans to attend. You will be glad you did.

There is the practical side of the Annual Meeting, and then there is its heart and soul: the awards given to honor individuals who give back to the profession. One of the most profound of these is the Liberty Bell award, which is given to non-lawyers who contribute to the justice system. I was touched by the stories of all three recipients.

Shirley Cochran of Flint had a desire to help the children of female inmates lodged at the Genesee County Jail. She began by delivering gifts and clothing to the children with tags labeled "from Mom" to help incarcerated mothers maintain an emotional connection with their children, and soon organized an initiative to maintain their physical connection by transporting children to the jail for visits. Cochran's initiative became a nonprofit organization in 2005 called Motherly Intercession, and further expanded its services with a variety of educational

programs to benefit both the inmates and their children.

Jessie Dawkins of Saginaw has worked tirelessly with youth in her community to promote education and foster respect for the justice system among youth. Dawkins has tutored and mentored local students for many years. She started by tutoring a classmate of her son, and expanded her work by teaching fifth and eighth graders about the consequences of juvenile shoplifting. Dawkins continued these initiatives with her service on Saginaw County's Crime Prevention Council and the Saginaw County Promise.

The Michigan Lawyers Auxiliary is among only five active lawyers' auxiliaries in the United States, and Mary Ann Farris is largely responsible for this. Each year for the past seven years, Mary Ann and her team of Auxiliary members organize a Law Day essay contest for Michigan sixth, seventh, and eighth graders sponsored by the Auxiliary. The competition requires students to study a specific Supreme Court case and express their opinion on the issues, which gets kids thinking about the law and its impact on their lives.

I was proud to join in applauding the efforts of Shirley Cochran, Jessie Dawkins, and Mary Ann Farris. We in the legal community do not always acknowledge those non-lawyers who work behind the scenes

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to support our justice system, whether by fostering respect for it among our youth, or simply by teaching people about its vital function in our society. It felt good to represent the State Bar to give this recognition.

A bittersweet but inevitable part of the Annual Meeting is to say goodbye to the outgoing State Bar president. My predecessor, Kim Cahill, is a tough act to follow. This year, time ran short at the inaugural luncheon, and we did not properly thank her for her excellent year of service. Kim's State Bar presidency followed years of dedicated service to this Bar, not only as a member of the Board of Commissioners, but also

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as a leader of the Representative Assembly and chair of the Bar's Access to Justice Campaign Committee, one among countless Bar committees to which she has applied her talents. Kim is a passionate advocate for access to the legal system, and our Bar has been strengthened by her efforts to call attention to this issue. We particularly owe Kim a debt of gratitude for the personal and professional sacrifices she made to devote herself to the State Bar presidency, coming as she does from a small law firm where one partner's absence surely has an impact. At the inaugural luncheon, Kim fittingly dedicated her presidency to her law partners, who also happen to be her mother and her sister.

If you weren't able to make the Annual Meeting this year, make plans to attend next year. With all these happenings and more, you won't want to miss it. ■