

Charles in Charge

75th president is a teacher at heart; passionate about leading by example

By Naseem Stecker

When he was just 21 years old, sailing around the world doing research for Woods Hole Oceanographic Institute and Scripps Institute of Oceanography, Charles R. Toy would from time to time turn his thoughts to what his future would be like. The year was 1972, and he had just earned a bachelor's degree in biological sciences from Oakland University with minors in physics and chemistry. He was fortunate to get the opportunity to work for such world-renowned ocean and earth science institutions, but what he envisioned for himself was not a life at sea charting underwater currents, determining contamination, and predicting global weather. His real interest was in academia. He wanted to be a university professor teaching resource development—and he needed a doctorate to fulfill that aspiration.

“When I was at sea I was thinking, I am going to see the world for as long as I can and someday return for my master's and PhD so that I can teach.”

In between each oceanographic expedition, which lasted two months, Toy visited sites and countries that interested him, from as far north as Iceland to southernmost New Zealand. He climbed Mt. Kilimanjaro, the highest peak in Africa; visited Serengeti National Park in Tanzania, which is famous for its annual migration of more than a million wildebeest and thousands of zebras; and hiked the breathtakingly beautiful and rugged South Island of New Zealand.

His adventures and travels exposed him to different cultures and peoples and a smattering of languages. “I remember once I put



Toy and Cooley students.

together a sentence using five different languages, and the person I was talking to understood me perfectly!”

He was at sea for two years—twice sailing around the world—before settling down at Michigan State University to begin a graduate program in park and recreation resources. When he was done with his coursework, a professor encouraged him to pursue a law degree to make him a more attractive faculty candidate. He did so, and discovered he was energized and excited by the law. After graduating summa cum laude in 1981 from Thomas M. Cooley Law School, he clerked with Court of Appeals Judge

Donald E. Hollbrook Jr. for two years, then spent another two years with the Ingham County Prosecutor's Office before joining the Lansing firm of Farhat and Story, where he practiced environmental law for 24 years.

“Charles started in environmental law at a time when few were interested or aware of the area,” observed Kim Eddie, a former State Bar commissioner. His science background was an asset, enabling him to easily learn an entire industry or a particular process. To thoroughly represent a client, he would learn the client's business. Toy outlined the process in an interview last year. “There was a Department of Defense missile plant that had

FactToys

- He was born just 12 blocks north of the State Bar building in Lansing.
- Dad was a data processor and one of the first three people in Lansing to own a computer.
- Mom graduated from nursing school from Michigan State in 1968—the same year Charles graduated from high school.
- Wife, Mary Ellen, is also a nurse.
- Granddad was a minister and Lansing City Council member.
- He teaches Sunday school to 80-year-olds.
- Charles and his wife, Mary Ellen, have three sons: Brian, 31; Matthew, 28; and David, 27, who graduated from Cooley Law School in May. Their 21-year-old daughter, Elizabeth, is an MSU student and has all the makings of a future opera star.
- The Toys will be grandparents of twins in December.
- Charles circumnavigated the world twice researching subsurface ocean circulation.
- He is the first State Bar president from Cooley Law School and the second from the Farhat and Story law firm in Lansing.
- He is also the 75th president of an organization celebrating its 75th birthday in 2010!

He not only has a passion for learning, but a strong desire to teach others... as an adjunct professor at Cooley Law School... and in a Sunday school class at his church where his students' average age is 80 years old!

significant environmental issues. Raw materials entered this plant and a fully-armed missile left the plant. This manufacturing produced numerous waste streams, which was my involvement, but the insight into the entire process of the plant was illuminating. I learned about such varied industries as logging, deep-well waste disposal, energy production, oil and gas exploration, wetland mitigation, contamination remediation, machine remanufacturing, clothing flammability testing, Delkon Shield design, and the consequences of that design.”

He not only has a passion for learning, but a strong desire to teach others. Since 2000, he has been an adjunct professor at Cooley Law School, teaching Conflict of Laws. He also facilitates a Sunday school class at his church where his students' average age happens to be 80 years old!

“All teaching, no matter what it is, has to be relevant. I don't care how dull a subject is, I believe a good instructor can make a subject matter come alive and can foster excitement in students. It doesn't matter if it's environmental law or Conflict of Laws, which many people think is a very dull area—it's not. If you start from the premise of relevance to the student and link it to some kind of understanding of humanity and how people react to things, then you can make a connection with a subject matter and make it interesting to the student.”

Currently, Toy is Cooley's associate dean of career and professional development, a position which was offered to him last year and which he accepted “without thinking twice.” His goal is 100 percent placement of every Cooley student and he's determined to see every graduate be “the model of pro-

fessionalism with high ethical standards, and anything I can do toward that end, I will.”

With his rich and varied background and talents, Charles Toy will bring new energy to the position of State Bar president. He will be the 75th president and the first from Cooley Law School to attain this honor. He's also the second SBM president from the Farhat and Story law firm in Lansing; Leo Farhat, whom Charles considers a mentor, was State Bar president from 1978 to 1979. Farhat's advice to Toy during his years at the firm was, “Learn the court rules, learn the rules of evidence, and serve the State Bar”—words that Toy took very seriously. In fact, the concept of “servant leadership”—or leading by serving others—has become his mantra. It also explains his enthusiasm for “A Lawyer Helps,” a State Bar program that highlights lawyers making a difference. “Lawyers are people of influence in their communities and their neighborhoods. I am eager to shine a light on their accomplishments and the important work that they do to help people.”

Toy is also excited that the Bar will be celebrating its 75th anniversary during his watch. “It will be a time to pause and take account of what's happened in the past, where we've been and where we are now. One thing you'll expect from me every time is to thank our members for what they do to make this a profession—not simply a guild or just an organization, but a true profession where we're regulating ourselves. So much is done by volunteers here, and I'm going to express gratitude on behalf of the Bar and on behalf of 75 years of history.”

His main message to members is to continue to invest in the profession and in

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Photo by Loreen Stoy

Seated: Mary Ellen and Charles Toy; standing, left to right: Amanda, David, Natalie, Brian, Elizabeth, and Matthew.

humanity, serve in important positions in State Bar committees and task forces, and serve the public for ideals we cherish, such as freedom, justice, and equality.

“In my view, it is always going to be important to be able to fund and have an independent judiciary; otherwise, citizens lose confidence in their government and its ability to resolve disputes. Defending indigents is another important constitutional issue, and it goes back to rudimentary justice. If citizens believe that the only way they can get a fair shake of justice in the state is if they have money, then that undermines the entire stability of our way of life.” That’s why reaching out to the public and broadening law-related education efforts will be an important part of his presidential year. “If we could energize the teachers, give them material that excites them and excites the students, at the same time educate the students to be better citizens, I think that’s critically important.”

Toy’s path to the presidency reflects his commitment to service. He has spent more than two decades on the council of the Environmental Law Section and served as its president in 2001. “Sections are subject-matter driven and it’s just a great way to learn a particular area of the law and inter-

act with attorneys in that area of practice.” Toy has also been on the State Bar Board of Commissioners (BOC) for almost 10 years and on the BOC Executive Committee since 2004, providing leadership, guidance, and oversight to the many operations of the State Bar—an organization that’s now more than 40,000 strong.

As for State Bar programs, he’s particularly impressed with the Practice Management Resource Center. “They are just spectacular as far as helping attorneys learn different methods of compiling data, keeping track of records, payroll, everything that’s offered there.” He also feels that members get top-notch benefits from the Bar’s electronic media—the e-Journal, the Public Policy Resource Center, and the SBM News-Links are ways attorneys can keep current on caselaw, public policy, and legal news.

With the state currently in the grips of a recession, this president is keenly aware of the adverse impact on lawyers and suggests that help from the Bar can also come in ways like facilitating networking and keeping a lawyer’s skills sharp by providing opportunities for pro bono work. Developing niche practices and seeking professional development or career services are also good options.

At the end of the day, seeking a balanced life is what matters to Charles Toy. “It’s not all about you. There is more to life than this client or that case.” In his experience, a supportive and close-knit family life has been a great blessing. He’s been married for 34 years to Mary Ellen, whom he met while she toured Woods Hole Oceanographic Institute in Massachusetts. They’d only known each other for 72 hours, but were instantly drawn to each other and started corresponding while he was at sea. He wrote long letters, beginning each one at the start of a new expedition and mailing it when he reached port at the end of the journey. He would also call her—on one occasion, he called from South America.

“There was only one public phone in my nursing dorm [Henry Ford Hospital in Detroit] and everyone heard about that phone

“He still brings me flowers for no reason at all. Family is very important to him and he is devoted to the activities of our children and very involved in their lives.”

call!” said Mrs. Toy. When she graduated from nursing school in 1973, Charles came to the ceremony “dressed in the full garb of a South African—a baby-blue suit with shorts and baby-blue knee socks with sandals!” recalls Mary Ellen. (Picture a safari-style jacket, but dressier looking, a lapel collar, and short sleeves.) She describes Charles as a very giving, thoughtful person.

“He still brings me flowers for no reason at all. Family is very important to him and he is devoted to the activities of our children and very involved in their lives.” The Toys have three sons (Brian, Matthew, and David) and a daughter (Elizabeth). Mary Ellen Toy remembers Charles taking the

Charles is...

Charles is bright, energetic, dedicated, hard-working, and pragmatic. He has integrity and good judgment. Charles is very well-informed on a number of subjects, so be careful of something you mention in passing during conversations because you may find out how little you know yourself. Of course, he is never condescending when you reveal your own limitations on the topic.

Charles will continue both the outstanding leadership tradition the State Bar of Michigan has had in recent years and the increasing interest of the Bar in working with law schools to assure that their graduates are prepared to practice and committed to professionalism and ethical conduct.

—**Don LeDuc, President,**
Thomas M. Cooley Law School

Charles is both a practitioner and scholar of the law. You often see one or the other, but not both. Charles has the ability to involve everyone in a discussion and to understand where he is seeking to go. He is also respected by all who know him.

Charles is blessed with a strong and supportive family. His daughter has an exceptional singing voice, which I know had to come from his wife, as Charles, like myself, can't carry a tune in a bucket.

—**Kim Warren Eddie, Assistant Executive Secretary,**
Prosecuting Attorney Coordinating Council

Charles is loyal, very enthusiastic, and very thorough in his teaching ability. He is a friend you can depend on. He's just a very stable person. I have known Charles for 25 years and was his senior pastor for 15 years. He's on the National Board of Administrators of the Free Methodist Church of North America. He's a great leader, very conscientious.

—**Rev. R. Daniel Shinabarger, Superintendent, East Michigan Conference,**
Free Methodist Church of North America

kids on some of his business trips so they could "be with their dad and be in a unique place. It was a good opportunity for the kids."

Charles Toy is still creating opportunities for others. As Cooley President Don LeDuc says, "Nothing speaks more highly of his character than the selection by his peers as president of the State Bar of Michigan. Charles is a really good listener and he has experience in a number of practice situations, so he will hear and understand the concerns of those he leads both in the profession and inside the bar association. He is also firmly committed to professionalism, public and pro bono service, and helping new lawyers make the transition from school to practice."

For one who's been almost everywhere and achieved a good deal in his personal life and career, arriving at 306 Townsend Street in Lansing as the president must seem like both the culmination of a long voyage and the beginning of a new jour-

ney—one that will cap a lifetime of serving others. ■

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