

Metamorphosis

A Master Lawyers Section Emerges

By Naseem Stecker

The two gavels in Edward Pugh's hands told the story—one gavel representing the Senior Lawyers Section and the other, the Master Lawyers Section. On October 1 in Grand Rapids, Pugh formally supplanted one section and declared the birth of the new Master Lawyers Section, which he chairs. It was a historic moment that came after more than three years of planning, meetings, and long discussions about how to engage an increasingly graying attorney population.

This change means that Michigan lawyers who are 60 years of age and older or have practiced law for 30 years receive automatic and free membership in the new section (with a provision to opt out). More than 11,700 Michigan lawyers meet this requirement. Those who are ages 50 to 59 or have completed 20 years of practice can join for a small fee. Last year's member demographics show that more than 57 percent of the State Bar population is over 50 years of age. Of this figure, almost 13 percent is 66 years of age and older.

Ronald Keefe, a former State Bar president who launched planning efforts for the new section, said the idea was to energize the group, capitalize on the wisdom of this generation, create programs and collaborations, and get more people involved. The Senior Lawyers Section had approximately 100 members; the changeover has added 117 times the membership.

"Now that everyone's automatically in, they're going to get the publications and the e-mails, they're going to see what's going on, and it'll be easier to reach them and get them to commit," Keefe said. "We have three critical needs: the need for pro bono, the need for mentoring, and the need to help senior lawyers who are retiring and closing or winding down their practices. There's a ton of things we can be doing."



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Keefe plans to address the Marquette County Bar Association about setting up a pilot mentoring program in several counties so designated experienced lawyers can help their younger peers with ethical or difficult legal issues.

Former State Bar commissioner Greg Ulrich, who has worked closely with Keefe on this project, discussed mandatory retirement limits set by some law firms. He noted that such limits may force lawyers out sooner than they are ready to leave. The upshot is they may set up their own practices and will need support. "If we can network with such people, it will help the Master Lawyers Section to be viable," Ulrich said.

Ulrich also mentioned that reaching out to experienced lawyers who want to do something different or restructure their work is something the new section seeks; for example, a lawyer may want to move from litigation to pretrial work. Ulrich, who's eager to get the ball rolling, would also like to see Master Lawyers Section members "volunteering to go into high schools in their communities to teach one or two classes a year that augment the civics curriculum, because the state has watered it down. Bring in what Sandra Day O'Connor has proposed and have that as an outreach in their community. It may translate to work; it may translate to relationships."

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As the section gears up with plans for a listserv, new electronic newsletters, Practice Management Resource Center seminars, and the identification of pro bono opportunities, Pugh promises to work with the Young Lawyers Section and others to share expertise and experience.

“We want to make sure that every unaffiliated attorney has someone to give them advice when they get in a little beyond their expertise,” Pugh said. “Our section will attempt to fill that void.”

More information about the Master Lawyers Section can be found at www.michbar.org/mastersection. ■



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Naseem Stecker is a staff writer for the Michigan Bar Journal. She can be contacted by e-mail at nstecker@mail.michbar.org.

Master Lawyers Section Treasurer Jon Kingsepp (left) presented Ed Pugh with the Rutherford Award recognizing bar service and leadership.



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Panelist Robert Grey Jr. makes a point about pro bono at the MLS annual meeting program. Grey is the executive director of the Leadership Council on Legal Diversity and vice chair of the Pro Bono Leadership Committee at Hunton and Williams LLP in Richmond, Virginia. Other speakers, from left: Richard Fellrath, MLS council member; Michael Chielens, executive director, Legal Aid of Western Michigan; and David Shaltz (not pictured), pro bono lawyer and of counsel, Chalgian and Tripp Law Offices.