

# Prelude to a Final President's Page



W. Anthony Jenkins

**M**any people told me that the bar year would pass quickly. What an understatement! It seems like just a couple of months ago I delivered my inaugural remarks and began travelling across Michigan to learn about the interests and needs of practicing lawyers and judges and how the SBM can better address them, and penned my first President's Page for the *Bar Journal*. I guess time does fly when you are having fun!

Given all that I have gained from this experience, I hope that in some small way I have helped to improve the quality of our profession, including the professional lives of diverse attorneys, and, more importantly, made a meaningful difference in the quality of life for Michigan's nonlawyers. Trying to make a difference for nonlawyers is why I was called to the bar in the first place, and fulfilling that aspiration has been one of my enduring motivations.

It is a motivation borne from my experience as a former professional athlete, a motivation to understand and master the rules of the game, to excel in their application and in the execution of skills and know-how, all with an eye toward being at the top of my game, but doing so as a part of a team with a collective goal of realizing excellence in performance and results. The aim is not merely to better the team, but, more importantly, to enhance the quality of the game itself and the level of satisfaction that the enhancement affords players, coaches, and spectators alike. Just as athletes can raise the bar in sports, so can we lawyers raise the bar in the quality of life of the people and entities we serve. This bar year, I have gained a greater appreciation for how you, as members of the bar, have been my "teammates" in making a difference by doing just that.

In my own arena, sometimes that difference is helping to smooth over the worries

of a single mother trying to safeguard the welfare of her children while employed in a hostile workplace; sometimes the difference is helping to calm an anxious father as he tries to hold on to his family's home while dealing with unsavory or unlawful tactics taken by someone who did not follow the rules in foreclosing on a piece of property; sometimes the difference is helping public officials change the skyline of a city to realize a vision and to renew hope among its residents and their neighbors that there is yet promise of and vitality for a brighter future; sometimes the difference is simply taking a phone call to answer questions about what happens to the belongings of a married couple who die within 48 hours of one another, both without wills and each with different surviving heirs; just last week it was simply listening to a father talk about the "bureaucratic shuffle" he is facing in trying to secure a mortgage modification from a lender who is demanding a six-figure balloon payment on an equity line of credit secured by a mortgage on the family home. Only one of these matters is for a paying client.

I want to believe that many, if not most, of you share my belief that we, as lawyers, can and should make a difference in the quality of life of others; that is to say, that we are and should be ministers of justice devoted to that end, whatever our particular passions in the law happen to be. For me, that is fundamental to what lawyers should

do with their awesome powers—challenge injustice, change the legal order, help those who are without the legal knowledge and tools to help themselves. We take an oath to represent clients zealously and to maintain their confidences, but are duty-bound to do so ethically and with civility; we advocate for the rule of law as an abiding principle in the pursuit of justice, but we also challenge the legitimacy of immoral laws and those laws that cannot withstand constitutional scrutiny; we represent the vulnerable sometimes in crisis situations, or when a life hangs in the balance, and often we do so at personal sacrifice, without compensation or notoriety or with little regard to personal circumstances. In doing these things and more, we carry out our roles as ministers of justice.

During this bar year, I have witnessed our team in action. A few examples include:

- The SBM Pro Bono Initiative's Annual Spring Workshop, which provided training for nonprofit directors, and pro bono managers and coordinators and their staffs
- The Oakland County Bar Association's People's Law College, a free lecture series to help educate nonlawyers about different areas of the law, and its Annual Senior's Day at which volunteer lawyers made presentations on a variety of legal topics

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- The Michigan Court of Appeals Annual Culinary Challenge, where lawyers and judges raised money for women's charities
- The donation of air conditioning units to senior citizens by the Conybeare law firm of St. Joseph
- The assembly of the Lansing Black Lawyers Association at the Black Child and Family Institute in Lansing in support of the United Way's Day of Caring
- The donation of food by Foster Swift Collins & Smith to the Greater Lansing Food Bank
- The volunteer work of Foster Zack Little Pasteur & Manning in support of the Habitat for Humanity in Okemos

Other examples include individual efforts, such as Thomas M. Cooley Law School student Jennifer Bylsmar's bone marrow donation, Cooley Law School Professor Stevie Swanson's collection and donation of prom dresses to needy families, the pro bono work of attorneys of the Zivian family helping a mother of four protect herself and her children from an abusive husband/father,

Cynthia Filipovich's volunteer work at food banks, Bonnie Christopher's work to secure a waiver of debt and continued VA checks for a veteran, Richard Bernstein's lawsuit in support of rights of the disabled, and many, many more...too many to mention here.

And so, while many would denigrate our profession, tell lawyer jokes, or otherwise engage in lawyer bashing, I know that we, as lawyers, do a lot of good work—a lot of healing that, without lawyers, would go undone. Perhaps our greatest power is that as ministers of justice we are uniquely trained to address legal problems, whether as jurists or practitioners, but no less important and impactful is the power we exercise in chambers of commerce, battered women's shelters, homeless shelters and food banks, symphony orchestras, churches and nonprofits, and the like. All such good work is accomplished through our powers as ministers of justice. And as your "captain" during this bar year, I thank and salute you for being faithful to the important work that you are doing.

I once heard my former law partner and good friend, Dennis W. Archer, say:

As an illustration of our power, as lawyers, we sit in legislatures, serve as senators, mayors, governors, and now even president of the United States. Now, that's

power....As lawyers we are also powerful healers, perhaps not of the body as doctors nor of the spirit as clergy. But, we are healers of injustice.

I agree and would add that, as ministers of justice, we are those who can free a body wrongfully imprisoned by injustice to allow it to enjoy the simple pleasures of an unsupervised walk in the park or the embrace of a loved one; we are those who can free an oppressed spirit to allow it to soar to new heights of self-respect and purpose; and we are those who can help others overcome not only their legal challenges, but other obstacles that life may present, and in doing so not only uplift and improve their lives, but also fulfill the proud legacy of those lawyers upon whose shoulders we stand as ministers of justice...as healers of injustice. That is our power—the power to right a wrong, the power to heal, the power to make a difference.

Again, I thank you all for your service and for the opportunity to further my own ministry through service as president of the SBM. ■

*I thank Dennis W. Archer for providing words of inspiration and wisdom for this article.*