

Stephen J. Gobbo, 2011–2012 Chair of the Representative Assembly

By Michael J. Marutiak, John E. Curley, and Mary L. Gobbo

Those of us who have worked with Stephen Gobbo, served on the Representative Assembly (RA) or Bar sections with him, or joined in his many worthwhile community endeavors are unanimous in the pronouncement that “there is only one Steve Gobbo.” We often say that if you look up the word “earnestness” in the dictionary, you will find a picture of Steve.

Common threads run through Steve’s life and career. Chief among them are his determination, dedication to family and community, and willingness to energetically serve in large and broad roles while always bringing with him his wit, courtesy, lightheartedness, and loquacious style. He rarely declines a chance to collaborate—or elaborate—with others on a deserving point.

The RA will have steady direction in the coming year. Steve assumed the chairmanship at the State Bar of Michigan Annual Meeting on September 15 in Dearborn. Hon. John M. Chmura, RA parliamentarian, administered the oath of office. Victoria Radke, the 2010–2011 RA chairperson, symbolically turned over the gavel to Gobbo. “Steve is a great team player and he totally immerses himself in the project at hand,” Radke said. “I know he will do a fine job leading the Representative Assembly.”

Steve has already mapped out a portion of his agenda for 2011–2012. The RA will continue to seek improvements in the criminal justice system and its procedures. Specifically, Steve views the unauthorized practice of law as a public protection matter that concerns the whole profession, and he supports the advancement of a court rule to clarify and stem unauthorized practice. A review of the responsibilities of the RA’s standing committees may lead to bylaw amendments, giving committees greater flexibility and scope and opening the channels of communication with each other. Toward the aim



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of greater participation in issue resolution, Steve brings a wealth of his own history.

Steve is director of the Legal Affairs Division, Bureau of Commercial Services, in the Michigan Department of Licensing and Regulatory Affairs and the state cemetery commissioner. First elected to the RA in 2004, he rose to the chairmanship through the natural progression from clerk and vice chair. He also serves on the State Bar’s Board of Commissioners (since 2009), RA committees, and the councils of the Criminal Law, Administrative and Regulatory Law, and Prisons and Corrections sections. Yet his professional journey and commitment neither begins nor ends with his many State Bar affiliations.

Steve was born and raised in a quiet, ethnically diverse neighborhood in Queens, New York. Nicknamed the U.N. (United Nations), the neighborhood was populated by children of immigrant parents predominantly from Europe and South America. His father, an Italian immigrant, worked as a longshoreman on the New York City docks. His mother, the daughter of Polish immigrants and a Pennsylvania coal miner who died

on the job, guided her children through the urban terrain and local parochial schools.

Steve inherited his parents’ strong work ethic and drive to succeed. He was an excellent high school athlete, and his commitment and endurance made him a standout member of an accomplished track and field team that frequently won city-wide track meets. His excellent grades and extracurricular activities earned him entry to Manhattan College, where he majored in psychology—“Something I’ll never regret,” Steve said, “because of the insight it gives me into real life concerns and individuals”—while minoring in criminal justice and sociology. From there, he moved on to the New York Institute of Technology, earning a master’s degree in labor and industrial relations, focusing on human resources and organizations.

Before finding his way to Michigan (more later about the mountain road he chose), Steve held numerous positions in state government in both New York and Connecticut. During the course of his undergraduate and post-graduate studies, his keen interest in both criminal and regulatory law (“strange bedfellows,” he admits) propelled him through the ranks of the New York State Department of Correctional Services, from the Personnel Office to the Budget and Commissioner’s offices, to labor relations issues, and, ultimately, to the position of deputy superintendent at a correctional facility at the age of 29—the youngest at the time.

Steve left New York to become administrative officer for the Connecticut Alcohol and Drug Abuse Commission, where he found an overlap in issues affecting the fields of corrections and criminal justice. But law school called, bringing him to Michigan in 1991 when he enrolled at Thomas M. Cooley Law School. After relocating to Michigan in 1992, he took a job as a financial analyst with the Michigan Department of Corrections and shortly thereafter was



The Gobbo family at a recent family reunion in Pennsylvania, left to right: Sons Alexander and Dominic, wife Mary, son Stephen, Steve, sons Anthony and Nicholas, and daughter-in-law Jessica.

promoted to deputy division administrator at maximum-security prisons.

“We’ll be going back east again soon, now that law school is over,” Steve used to tell his friends. “We’re just here for a while.” That was almost 20 years ago, and the Gobbo family is as rooted in Michigan today as the Bar building itself.

From New York to Connecticut to Michigan, Steve brought with him the lessons he learned in organizational behavior, strategic thinking, public policy, and the all-important sphere of human relations. Those who have served with him on committees, sections, planning groups, or in strategy sessions know he is always ready to share his experiences of what worked or didn’t work somewhere else. Steve believes diverse backgrounds and work experiences give collaboration its true value.

To say that Steve’s family is proud of his accomplishments and dedication to his profession is an understatement. The road to law school and admission to the Bar requires hard work and determination, but Steve’s situation required a herculean effort of time management and personal organization.

When Steve enrolled in law school in Michigan, he was also firmly committed to his work in Connecticut and his wife and three sons (with the fourth on the way). His employer, grateful for his hard work and accomplishments, allowed him to restructure his work duties so he could attend law classes in Michigan two nights a week. While in Michigan, he studied law at night; in Con-

necticut, he devoted his time to his family and his full-time job. During that one year of commuting to law school, he was uncomfortable with any meal not delivered to him by a flight attendant. Steve is grateful for the flexibility afforded him by Cooley Law School’s twice-weekly night program. He commends the vision of former Chief Justice Brennan and others who founded the law school, which now has a weekend program.

Once Steve moved his family to Michigan, his job with the Department of Corrections eventually included a long commute and overnight stays in Standish for two years. His time-management skills served him well—he listened to class lectures on tape while driving and spent many nights away from his family, studying law.

The family settled north of Lansing in DeWitt Charter Township, where they live today. Steve and his wife, Mary, have five sons—Steve Jr. (29), Nick (25), Alexander (21), Anthony (19), and Dominic (18). Nick is currently preparing for his law school admissions tests.

“What fabulous life lessons our sons have learned from Steve,” Mary Gobbo said. “He has shown them the value of determination and giving back to society. The lesson they learn from him is that people working together can make positive changes in our world. Steve embodies this attribute fully, and we could not be more proud of him.”

“My wife and I love the Gobbo family,” said Alan Cropsey, former chairperson of the Senate Judiciary Committee. “Steve’s le-



Former Chief Justice and Thomas M. Cooley Law School President Thomas Brennan Sr. (left) and Steve at a Cooley alumni event honoring Brennan.

gal stories are thrilling with his natural ‘Jersey accent.’ Our lives are richer because of their friendship.”

As one might expect, Steve is active in local government, community, volunteer, and nonprofit organizations. He presently works with the DeWitt Township Planning Commission and is vice chair of the township Board of Appeals. His other contributions include involvement with Habitat for Humanity, Legal Aid of Central Michigan, and youth recreational programs. Steve is a past recipient of the Ingham County Bar Association’s award for pro bono legal services on behalf of indigent clients.

Some of the issues facing the Representative Assembly are coming to fruition, while others have yet to surface. The agenda will be influenced by the whirlwind of political and budgetary concerns that affect every part of the state. Yet we can expect one constant during our new year—earnestness and steady direction from Chairperson Steve Gobbo. ■

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John E. Curley, a partner in the Southfield law firm Curley & Burkal PC, attended grammar school and high school with Steve in New York City.

Mary L. Gobbo is managing member of Management Support Services LLC, a home-based business that provides transcription and support services to medical providers.