

# Walking in the Footsteps of a Drum Major for Justice

**Bruce A. Courtade:** 78th President Transforms Passions into Actions

By Naseem Stecker



Left to right: Wife Jenny DeLessio, Bruce, and daughter Jessica.

“I started carrying the Constitution every day to remind me of why we do what we do—that we stand in the breach, advocating not only for our clients, but for the American justice system.”

If Bruce A. Courtade is ever stopped by a police officer and frisked, the officer will undoubtedly find a copy of the U.S. Constitution tucked in the inside pocket of Bruce’s suit coat. Why a pocket Constitution? The short answer: September 11, 2001. Bruce recalls driving home to Grand Rapids on I-96 in mid-September that year from a shortened and somber State Bar Annual Meeting in Lansing. He came across a ramp still under construction to the Paul Henry Freeway.

“Someone had planted an American flag on the overpass and I remember crying so hard I had to pull off to the side of the road. I remember thinking, Why did this happen? What can I do? It occurred to me that one of the reasons that America was being attacked that day was because of the freedoms and

rights that we lawyers are entrusted to protect. So I started carrying the Constitution every day to remind me of why we do what we do—that we stand in the breach, advocating not only for our clients, but for the American justice system.”

The Constitution reminds him every day of the reason he became a lawyer. His wife of 23 years, Jenny DeLessio, has learned to check his suit coats before sending them to the dry cleaners because he has a pocket Constitution squirreled away in every one of them. She says Bruce honestly believes there is no greater professional calling than to stand as a lawyer at the bar of justice and recognize and defend the rights of citizens.

“On any given September 17 (Constitution Day), you will find Bruce in a fifth-grade classroom explaining and extolling

the United States Constitution and its enduring power to protect the rights of every American.”

Bruce always wanted to be a lawyer, and told his teachers in grade school that was his ambition, even though he couldn’t spell it properly at the time. “I want to be a lawyer,” he wrote when asked by his second grade teacher. The youngest of three sons and the fifth of six children, he grew up in Dearborn Heights. His father started as a copy boy with *The Detroit News* shortly after World War II and worked his way up through the ranks, including writing a consumer advocacy column known as “Contact 10,” which Bruce credits for teaching him that fighting for “the little guy” was honorable and rewarding, and that one person could make a difference in the lives of many. His mother, who recently



Photo by Michigan Photography, Austin Thomason



moved to Jenison, Michigan, was a teacher and active school board member. Both instilled in him a sense of accountability and civic consciousness.

In fact, one could say community service is embedded in Bruce's DNA. As a young attorney in Grand Rapids, he donated his services to a National Guard recruiting office to help the families of those called to active duty during Operation Desert Storm. He soon found himself coordinating more than 350 attorneys who helped families with wills, powers of attorney, and housing and credit issues. The experience showed him a side of the profession that was very motivating and appealed to his natural sensibilities. For his efforts, Bruce was honored in 1991 with the State Bar's John W. Cumiskey Pro Bono Award, named after a Grand

Rapids icon who impressed on Bruce that legal aid was not a Republican issue or a Democrat issue, but a justice issue.

Bruce earned his undergraduate degree from the University of Michigan in 1984 and graduated from the University of Michigan Law School in 1988. He also met his wife, Jenny, at law school. He was president of the law school student senate and she was vice president. They married soon after graduating and settled in Grand Rapids. They have a 20-year-old daughter, Jessica, who is in her junior year at the University of Michigan. The family also has a dog that Bruce named Bo, after former Michigan football coach Bo Schembechler.

"It drives Bruce crazy when I put Bo in a little maize and blue football jersey on game day," Jenny said, "but rooting for the Wol-

verines is a family imperative!" Jenny, vice president of American Education Group, a private-school company based in Grand Rapids, shared some insight about her husband's character.

"Bruce was really excited when the new license plates became available several years ago sporting a block 'M.' But when his new plate arrived in the mail with 'BACJD' on it, I told him, 'Do you really have to announce to the world that you are a lawyer? It's sort of obnoxious.' Bruce did a double take and quickly set me straight: 'No, no, no! That's our initials, Bruce A. Courtade/Jenny DeLessio. But now that you've pointed it out, I like the juris doctor reference too!' When our daughter, Jessie, got home and saw the plate, she declared, 'That's so cool! Bruce A. Courtade—Jessie's Dad!' So that one piece

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of metal tells you a lot about what you need to know about Bruce: he loves the University of Michigan, he loves being a lawyer, but above all else, he loves his family.”

Currently a shareholder at Rhoades McKee PC, Bruce’s focus is commercial litigation and construction law. In 2010, he and colleagues Paul McCarthy, Greg Timmer, and Stephen Hulst won a \$79 million verdict for their clients in a shareholder oppression lawsuit. The verdict was the highest reported in the state that year and is believed to be the highest in Kent County Circuit Court history. Bruce says the verdict was one of the most personally rewarding experiences of his career because, even though the dollar amounts were large, “it was still a classic ‘David vs. Goliath’ case, and to see my client—who pressed on against his oppressor because, as he told the jury, ‘Sometimes, you just have to stand up for what is right’—

and the joy on his face when the jury agreed with him is something that I wish every attorney could experience once or twice in his or her life.” The case is still on appeal.

As the 78th president of the State Bar of Michigan, Bruce comes to the job loaded with years of experience that started at the local level and led to the chairmanship of the Representative Assembly in 2001. He was elected to the Board of Commissioners in 2004 and has served as treasurer, secretary, vice president, and president-elect. Bruce is also a Fellow of the Michigan State Bar Foundation and a panelist for the Attorney Discipline Board.

“I love to volunteer my time but I hate to waste my time,” Bruce said when asked about his leadership style. “I like to run a tight meeting. I like to have fun. My leadership style will show that we work hard but we play hard, too. I try to keep a good sense

of humor and keep things moving along. It’s both easy and challenging to lead a group like the SBM Board of Commissioners.

“I’ve been lucky to see and to work under a number of presidents and to see the different styles that people have. We have an outstanding group of lawyers who think problems through and who bring their many perspectives to the table—99 percent of the time they check their egos and politics at the door and they’re focusing on how we best serve the public and our profession.”

His greatest mentor was former SBM President Kim Cahill, who died of cancer in 2008. “Kim had an incredible ability to listen to people, hear what they were saying, and understand their motivations. Ultimately, when it came time for the decision to be made, she was able to convince everyone in the room that it was their idea that carried the day—or at least that even if the issue was decided differently than what they had hoped for, they knew that they were heard and understood.”

During his presidential term, Bruce hopes to stress the importance of educating the public regarding the rule of law and our justice system. “Unless people understand the importance of our courts and justice system, they will not understand the threat posed to our way of life by the underfunding of our third branch of government, or the serious damage to our society when ‘equal access to justice’ is not a reality and not even an aspiration, but simply something that sounds good in a speech or looks good on a bumper sticker,” he said.

Access-to-justice issues are paramount to Bruce. He’s thrilled that the Judicial Crossroads Task Force started the process of much-needed change to the state’s judicial structure.

“The result has been, for instance, downsizing of the courts, resizing of certain courts, coming up with business courts that are being tested in Oakland, Macomb, and Kent counties, which will change how we practice law in the state of Michigan for the better,” he said. “It will help in the funding crisis that is facing our courts which, in my mind, is one of the biggest threats to access to justice around the state. If you can’t fund the courts—when you have court employees being placed on furlough days and clerks’

“Bruce loves the University of Michigan, he loves being a lawyer, but above all else, he loves his family.”

*Photo by Michigan Photography, Scott C. Soderberg*



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## Go Bruce!

Bruce is one of my closest friends and a person who would do anything within his power to help not just his friends, but many others in the community. I have known him since he was in law school. One of my undergraduate roommates became his roommate at the University of Michigan, so we met while I was visiting Ann Arbor. Since then we have bonded over beer, sports, politics, and, later, family. While we don't always see eye to eye, there is no one I respect more personally or professionally. And while I cannot judge his legal skill from a peer's perspective, I have seen him work nights, weekends, through meals, and during vacations to give his clients the best possible representation. I know he has been honored for his skill and dedication and I am most impressed by his commitment to providing representation for those who have difficulty affording it. He knows that our justice system cannot be just if it is not accessible on at least relatively equal footing to everyone in the community.

Bruce is a natural mediator as well. I am confident he will be able to work with people of conflicting values and goals and develop consensus that will result in the Bar's improving its standing among members, community leaders, and the general public. His openness and willingness to embrace new concepts combined with organization and planning skills also mean Bruce will position the Bar to be successful for his term and beyond.

One of my favorite indicators of Bruce's leadership is his work with the U-M Alumni Association to provide college scholarships. Bruce takes many hours of his personal time to review scholarship applications, interview students, and work with committee members to help worthy students attend the university. He organizes the process and recruits others to assist, all to help and encourage children to pursue higher education and to promote the school he loves. Almost every year, he identifies students through the scholarship process who might need a little inspiration, a good word with the admissions office, or even some career mentoring or an introduction to U-M administrators who can help work through the administrative maze that is Ann Arbor. He does these things for many students, scholarship win-

ners or not. Often, Bruce finds a way to help students without being personally involved or taking any credit. I am convinced that many students from the Grand Rapids area attend the University of Michigan never knowing that their college career may have taken place at a different school were it not for Bruce.

Bruce is funny, generous, spiritual, knowledgeable, gregarious, and smart. He is dedicated to his family, immediate and extended. His huge network of friends and associates is not a result of working to build a network, but because people genuinely want to be close to Bruce. I am proud to be one of those who call him friend.

—Jeff Minore

*Chief of Staff to House Democratic Leader  
Richard Hammel*

I have known Bruce for many years as a loyal and enthusiastic member of the University of Michigan Alumni Association and more recently as a member of the Advisory Board of Intercollegiate Athletics.

Bruce is a direct, aggressive, fair, and engaging person. He has a great sense of humor, and people feel comfortable trusting him to do the right things. He is smart, practical, and passionate about the people and causes he chooses to support.

Bruce was a cheerleader at the University of Michigan during his college days. His love for the university's traditions prompts him to occasionally come out of retirement and cheer at our homecoming football games. He still has skills!

Bruce is a terrific leader and will serve the State Bar of Michigan with great distinction.

—David A. Brandon

*Director of Athletics, University of Michigan*

Bruce was an early supporter of the West Michigan Center for Arts and Technology and one of its earliest board members. This organization is close to Bruce's heart, as it is a place that meets two critical community needs—serving high school students at risk of dropping out and training unemployed adults in in-demand

careers. Bruce has served this mission for the past seven years and is practically a full-time employee. He is constantly advocating for the population WMCAT serves as well as working as a cheerleader in the business community for corporate involvement in the organization's mission.

Bruce has the unique ability to make every person he comes in contact with fall in love with a cause or organization he is passionate about. He even got me to fall in love with the University of Michigan and I am a Michigan State University alum! In addition to turning others on to causes and organizations, Bruce moves people to act. His ability to transfer passion into action is what makes him remarkable.

Bruce is a leader in many areas, but one area that stands out most is his dedication to educational access for diverse populations. I have seen this happen on both a large and small scale—from Bruce's work with the University of Michigan's commitment to diversity to his individual relationship with a WMCAT alum finding her way in her academic journey.

Bruce has amazing friends. As a person who values diversity, this is reflected in the wonderful people in his life whom he celebrates and shares with those around him. Quite simply, Bruce rocks!

—Luisa Schumacher

*Executive Director, West Michigan Center  
for Arts and Technology*

For as long as I have known Bruce, he has been an active volunteer and leader for the University of Michigan and the Alumni Association. As a leader in his local U-M Alumni Club, through his service as a member of the Association's Board of Directors, and as an advisor to the university's leadership, Bruce has always given unselfishly to help the university become stronger.

He is untiring in his performance, unwavering in his commitment to an organization he loves, and unstoppable when he puts his mind and energy behind something. Before 2005, the Alumni Association's Board of Directors had more than 80 members—far too many to participate in meaningful decision making even

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## Go Bruce! (continued)

though the group had full governance and fiduciary responsibility. In the wake of the Enron debacle and Sarbanes-Oxley legislation, Bruce led a restructuring of the board and, in the face of strong political opposition, helped convince the majority of the board members to vote themselves out of office.

Bruce is one of the most honorable men I know. He fights hard but he fights fair, and his fight is always for something worthwhile. I trust him totally and have nothing but the highest respect for him. The State Bar is fortunate to have him as its next leader.

—Steve Grafton

*President and CEO, Alumni Association  
of the University of Michigan*

I have known Bruce since 1989, when I clerked in Grand Rapids with Law, Weathers & Richardson (LWVR) after my first year of law school. At the time, Bruce was an associate with the firm and, while not his official role, always went beyond the call to make me and other newcomers feel welcome and comfortable. I often explain that Bruce is one of the reasons I chose to move to Grand Rapids after completing law school, so to the good people of Grand Rapids, I say, "Blame him."

We practiced together at LWVR for almost 10 years; in 2000, we left the firm for different positions. During the 20-plus years I have known Bruce, he has been at various times a mentor, a partner, and a trusted advisor, but always and above all a true and valued friend. Whether about the practice of law or just life in general, I cannot count the number of times I have asked Bruce, "Got a minute? I'd like to run something by you." I would turn to Bruce then, as I still do today, because I know that whatever the advice, it will be well reasoned and honest and, when I might prefer less honesty, delivered with compassion.

—Jim Polonczyk

*The Armada Group*

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offices closed on certain days—that is not access to justice. It prevents people from being able to get into court. It's unconscionable.

"Can you imagine telling the police or the military, who are responsible for protecting us from physical harm, to stand down one day a week? So how can closing our courts, which are responsible for protecting our personal freedom and liberties, not be seen as just as serious a threat to the American life and the American dream? People always talk about the three branches of government—with the current court funding crisis, we are dealing with a three-legged milk stool where one of the legs is cut off halfway down."

Funding for legal aid is also a concern because of reduced federal help and the growing ranks of the poor knocking ever more loudly on courtroom doors. To date, Michigan attorneys have contributed more than \$10 million to the State Bar's Access to Justice program and donated thousands of pro bono hours to indigent clients, but the need still far outstrips available resources.

Better technology may lead us in a hopeful new direction. A statewide self-help website called Michigan Legal Help! (<http://michiganlegalthelp.org>) has been launched to help self-represented litigants handle simple civil legal matters. The project is funded by the Michigan State Bar Foundation as part of the Solutions on Self-Help Task Force created two years ago by then Michigan Supreme Court Chief Justice Marilyn Kelly to promote greater centralization, coordination, and quality of support for self-represented litigants.

"These people will now get their matters handled appropriately and clear up the court docket to allow those clients who have representation to proceed with their cases efficiently," Bruce said. "I think that this could end up actually creating work for lawyers and it's going to be more focused work. It will help to initially screen matters that lawyers don't want or need to handle."

Bruce takes office against a backdrop of difficult economic times, a slower-than-expected recovery, a shrinking middle class, and fewer clients for attorneys. At the same time, the ranks of attorneys joining the profession are increasing—approximately 1,100 new lawyers are licensed in the state each year.

"It's a constantly changing profession and I find that exciting and fascinating and sometimes scary just because you never know what's coming next. We've got more lawyers and fewer clients, and that means more pressures across the board. It's not just the solos or small firms—the big firms are feeling the pinch, too. Fortunately in Michigan, we've avoided the collapse of major law firms. But there are more pressures placed on every lawyer every day, so I think that's going to be a big issue during my year."

Bruce is heartened by the fact that the State Bar—with more programs in place than ever before and an outstanding reputation for legislative grassroots advocacy—continues to listen closely and respond to members' needs. He plans to travel around the state to hear the legal community's concerns and to suggest or take action. "The Bar is in outstanding shape. We have more programs for more lawyers, and we're doing it more efficiently than ever before."

As for a legacy, he takes inspiration from Martin Luther King Jr., who once said, "Say that I was a drum major for justice." Bruce would like to follow in those footsteps.

"When the day comes when they are taking a measure of Bruce Courtade, it would be good to hear someone say that he led the way to increased access to Justice (with a capital 'J') and that he helped the State Bar in that way. I think I would rest very happy if that's how I was remembered." ■

### A note from the author:



*It has been such a privilege and joy to write so many articles for the Michigan Bar Journal. I found it one of the most rewarding and satisfying aspects of my work here at the*

*State Bar. This piece is my eleventh profile of a State Bar president and sadly my last. After 12 years, I am moving on, but wanted to take this opportunity to bid all of you in the legal community a fond farewell. I have learned so much from you and will cherish all the good memories; in the end, it is the relationships and true friendships that we make along the journey that stay with us. Keep well and keep reading the Michigan Bar Journal.*

—Naseem Stecker