

Maintaining Balance (and a Supply of Reese's Peanut Butter Cups)



Bruce A. Courtade

In the seven months I have been State Bar president, I have traveled far and wide within and outside of Michigan speaking to, and on behalf of, Michigan lawyers. In meetings large and small, I have met hundreds of attorneys, dozens of policymakers, and untold numbers of people not directly involved in the legal profession but whose interest in the law brought us together. I have spoken to bar associations, student organizations, and civic groups not only about the lawyer's role as gatekeeper of justice, but also the issues facing our profession and questions about what the practice of law might look like in the years ahead.

I have put more than 12,000 miles on my car—including 4,300 miles in March alone. By the time you read this column, I will have returned from a trip to Washington, D.C., with State Bar Executive Director Janet Welch, Clark Hill attorney Reginald Turner Jr., Muskegon County Circuit Court Judge Timothy Hicks, and State Bar Director of Governmental Relations Peter Cunningham. We'll have visited every Michigan congressional office in an effort to restore Legal Services Corporation's funding, which has been seriously cut in the last few years.

It has been a whirlwind seven months, to be sure.

At the same time, I have struggled to maintain a full-time legal practice—relying heavily on my colleagues at Rhoades McKee to fill in when my State Bar duties call me away from the office or make it impossible for me to be in court—and also to make sure my wife and daughter know they are still the most important part of my life.

Occasionally, maintaining that balance can be daunting, such as the day my assistant, Dawn, came into my office, presented me with a Reese's Peanut Butter Cup, and explained, "You look like you could use a

little pick-me-up today." That simple act not only brought a (slightly chocolate-covered) smile to my face, but also reminded me just how fortunate I am to be able to do what I do with great people like Dawn, who inspire me to continue to press forward even when I may feel my passion for what I am doing beginning to wane. Similarly, my travels around the state have allowed me to meet and be inspired by many incredible Michigan lawyers—bar members whose passion for access to justice and equal opportunity within our profession energize me to forge ahead to whatever is next on the State Bar agenda.

For instance, our State Bar delegation concluded a four-day, 638-mile excursion through the Upper Peninsula last fall at a reception hosted by the Marquette County Bar Association at the Landmark Hotel in Marquette. There, we learned that the local bar was kicking off a program to provide the working poor—those who might earn too much to qualify for legal aid but still can't afford to pay for an attorney—with access to local attorneys who agree to charge reduced fees to those who desperately need a lawyer's assistance.

How appropriate. Marquette is the hometown of former State Bar President Ron Keefe, during whose term the Bar moved forward with plans for what is now known

as the Master Lawyers Section, allowing our most experienced members to remain active within the profession as they wind down their practices; a key component of the Marquette County Bar Association program is the willingness of master lawyers to volunteer their time to make the endeavor as successful—reaching as many members of the public—as possible. What a great idea! Hearing about the Marquette bar's plans and spending the evening at a dinner prepared by Ron's lovely wife (and my favorite artist) Marilyn at their home, I could feel the miles fall away and Ron's commitment to our profession renewing my energy.

I had a similar experience just before Christmas. My wife and daughter will attest that I am generally a Christmas nut, complete with a collection of a few dozen Santa figurines and a second "Michigan" Christmas tree specifically for our basement rec room decorated in maize and blue and festooned with various ornaments, photos, press box passes, bowl tickets, and the like. Last year, though, with the holidays fast approaching and my schedule packed to the gills, I was feeling less joyful than usual. Thankfully, I had the opportunity to speak to the Centennial Inns of Court chapter in Flint. Sharing the evening with new friends and old (Genesee County Circuit Judge Joseph Farah, State Bar Commissioner

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Don Rockwell, and former Commissioner B. D. "Chris" Christenson, to name a few), I heard about Flint attorney Brian Barkey's longstanding efforts to provide toys and other gifts for hundreds of disadvantaged children from some of Flint's poorest neighborhoods. I learned that a number of Flint attorneys made it an annual part of their holiday celebrations to not only donate money to support this event, but to also take their children—and in at least one case, grandchildren—to the event where the gifts were distributed. Hearing about the joy these lawyers brought not only to recipients of their generous gifts but to those who donated time and money to collecting, buying, and giving away the toys and presents, my holiday spirit was renewed and my batteries recharged.

Last month, through the efforts of my good friends Joy Fossil, the American Bar Association cover girl;¹ Supreme Court Chief of Staff and General Counsel Matthew Schneider, a cover boy in his own right as he was recently selected a member of the *Michigan Lawyers Weekly* 2013 class of "Leaders in the Law"; and Court of Appeals Judge Amy Ronayne Krause, I had the privilege of joining 10 ninth- and tenth-grade students from University Prep Academy in Grand Rapids when they took a behind-the-scenes tour of the Hall of Justice in Lansing.² The tour was part of an extensive internship program adopted by U-Prep, which I wish could be replicated around the state. As I understand it, every U-Prep student is asked to identify a particular job or profession in which he or she might be interested in working as an adult. The students are then divided into interest groups; over a four-week period, those groups meet twice weekly for about three hours getting fairly intensive, hands-on exposure in their areas of interest.

In this case, the students I met, all of whom were African American and all but one were young women, wanted to learn more about the legal profession. They had already met with Joy at her downtown Grand Rapids office in their first externship outing, and on April 11, the students and I, along with one of their teachers and a student advocate, boarded a bus donated by Spectrum Hospital and journeyed to Lansing.

At the Hall of Justice, Mr. Schneider gave us a tour of the Supreme Court, including the conference rooms where the judges discuss and decide the cases before them, and the robing room where they don their robes before entering the courtroom. We heard oral argument in a Judicial Tenure Commission case involving charges that a Wayne County Circuit Court judge had lied under oath and forged documents. The students were enthralled; one noted that such charges, if proven, would be sufficient to have them kicked out of U-Prep for violating its student code of conduct. A tour of the Supreme Court Learning Center followed; the students learned about the importance of jury duty (as well as whether their principal had the right to search their school lockers). Next, Judge Ronayne Krause welcomed the students into the courtroom and shared her experiences as a female attorney, district court judge, and now Court of Appeals judge.

Finally, it was my pleasure to bring the students back to the State Bar building where we talked about what they had seen and learned. Their energy, optimism, and abundant faith in the legal system (which, as it turns out, was reinforced by seeing that even judges were not above the law) were awesome and infectious. When we got off the bus back in Grand Rapids, they left me with a bounce in my step, looking forward to the day we might be fortunate enough to count each of them as members of our profession.

The following day, I joined Wayne State University Law School Dean Jocelyn Benson and State Senator Gretchen Whitmer for a panel discussion at the Women Lawyers Association of Michigan's annual meeting. Before the meeting, I discovered that the day-long event was inspired by and reflective of issues raised in the State Bar's *Caregiver Work Group Report*, issued in June 2012 at the behest of my predecessor, SBM President Julie Fershtman.³ The report identifies several best practices for large and small law firms and in-house legal departments to help lawyers handle work-life balance issues and maximize their ability to contribute in the workplace while still serving as caregivers—in many instances not only for their children, but also for their par-

ents. It also contains a wealth of information regarding issues facing caregivers (predominantly women) in law firms and in-house positions and offers potential solutions for addressing them.

As I was preparing for the WLAM presentation, the caregiver concept also resonated with me in my role as State Bar president. The job often takes more time than I thought it would, and I struggle with maintaining my work/other work/life balance. However, serving as your president is undoubtedly one of the most rewarding experiences of my life and one that shapes me even as I try to make an impact I hope survives long after my term is over.

Not that an occasional Reese's Peanut Butter Cup doesn't help, but the biggest lesson I have learned in my term thus far is that our members and their commitment to the ideals of our profession energize me and carry me through those times when the hectic nature of what I do requires a little balance check. For that, I thank each of those whom I have met and the others who contribute their talents and time to inspire young people, help their communities in challenging times, and lend their skills to clients in need. You continue to inspire me and rekindle my passion for the profession I love. ■

ENDNOTES

1. For those who missed it, Joy and several other extremely worthy lawyers were featured on the cover of the February 2013 *ABA Journal*, which highlighted their exemplary efforts to provide pro bono legal services for the poor. See Ward, *Working for free: Lawyers incorporating pro bono into their lives talk about its rewards, challenges*, *ABA J* [2013], available at <http://www.abajournal.com/magazine/article/working_for_free/> (accessed April 18, 2013).
2. I would be remiss if I did not also mention and thank Deb Kolinka Manning from U-Prep, Linda Breiler from the Michigan Supreme Court, Matt VanVranken and Lynn Patterson from Spectrum Hospital, Rachael Drenovsky from the Supreme Court Learning Center, Sarah Seguin from the Court of Appeals, and Marge Bossenbery from the State Bar of Michigan for their efforts in pulling this trip together and making it such a memorable day for the U-Prep students.
3. See State Bar of Michigan, *Findings from the Caregiver Work Group Report of the Diversity and Inclusion Advisory Committee of the State Bar of Michigan*, available at <<http://www.michbar.org/diversity/pdfs/caregiver.pdf>> (accessed April 18, 2013).