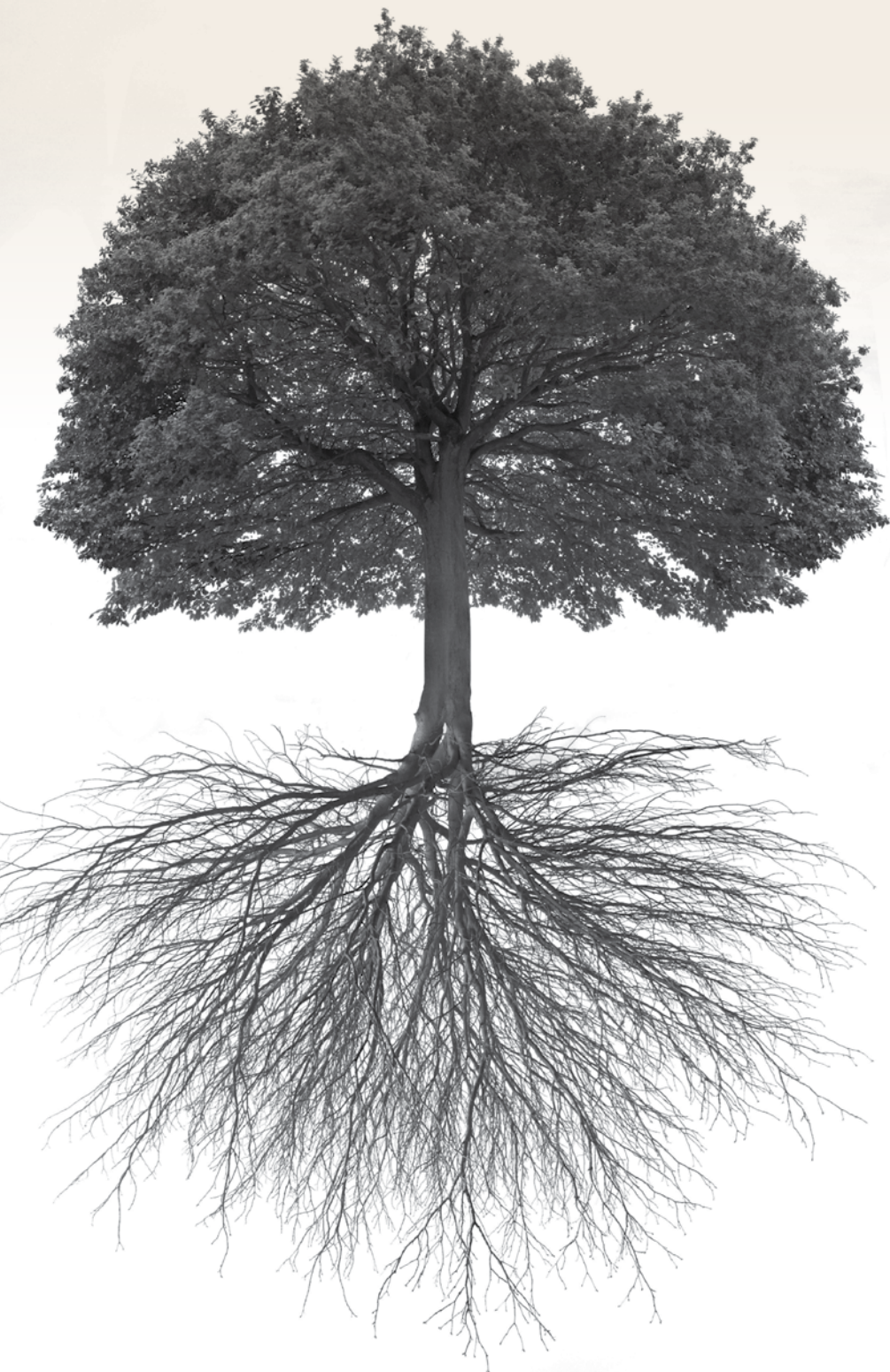


The Ties That Bind

By Lynn Patrick Ingram



Perseverance is something incoming State Bar of Michigan President Lori Buiteweg knows well. As the daughter of a steelworker turned engineer, granddaughter of hard-working Italian immigrants, and niece of a World War II veteran who survived the D-Day invasion of Normandy, it's in her blood. And she's bringing that homespun determination to the State Bar.

Survival of the fittest

Buiteweg's ancestors paved the way as living examples of what it takes to survive, literally and figuratively. Her maternal grandparents emigrated from Italy. When they arrived at Ellis Island, her grandmother was quarantined with a wound. Her grandfather spent the next two weeks sleeping on a bench in Battery Park until she was released. They settled in western Pennsylvania, where they grew and sold flowers and vegetables, and where he worked in a foundry that made heating boilers and radiators, eventually dying of cancer in his mid-80s. Her paternal grandparents, first-generation Americans also of Italian descent, overcame their own struggles. Her grandfather survived being shot in the stomach during a holdup at the gas station he owned. Her Uncle Joe survived the storming of Normandy and is still alive today.

These instincts and traits were passed on to Buiteweg's own parents. Her father unloaded steel at a local mill to put himself through college at Youngstown State University, where he obtained an engineering degree. He worked for General Motors for 38 years before retiring. Her mother worked as a keypunch operator, then became a stay-at-home mom when Buiteweg and her sister were born.

Clearly, Buiteweg was not short on examples of how to succeed in life, and she did not miss her opportunities. She



Photo by Mark W. Johnson, MD

Lori and Tom pose in front of Schönbrunn Palace in Vienna, Austria during the Pioneer High School Symphony Band's Central Europe Tour, April 7–14, 2014.



Photo by Melissa Zamora

The Buitewegs gather for son Joseph's high school graduation party on May 24, 2015. Left to right: Michael, Lori, Tom, and Joseph.

finished in the top 10 in her graduating high school class where she was, not surprisingly, student council president and captain of the gymnastics team. She studied at the University of Michigan before attending evening classes at Wayne State University Law School, where she met her husband, Tom, also a lawyer (he was helping his brother, Buiteweg's classmate, in a mock trial exercise).

Buiteweg has had several great examples and mentors, but says the person who inspires her most now is her husband.

"His dedication to our profession far surpasses mine," she said. "He tirelessly, quietly donates hundreds of hours to our profession on a national level and seeks no recognition for it."

He says the same about her.

"She acts with total humility in the service of others and never seeks the limelight for herself," Tom Buiteweg said. "It is the same whether she is counseling clients, working on behalf of the State Bar and the profession generally, or just being the great mom and wife that she is."

The Buitewegs recently celebrated 25 years of marriage. They spent much of that time setting the same example for their two sons that others set for them. Michael, who was born on Constitution Day, and Joe both followed in their mother's footsteps and are now undergraduates at the University of Michigan.

Family ties

Buiteweg says her family and being a lawyer are the two things she's most passionate about, and those passions leave little time for anything else.

"One son always says, 'Mom, you need a hobby.' I tell him, 'You're my hobby!' My other son inevitably asks, 'Do you ever notice how every conversation ends up about the law, Mom?' I answer, 'What else is there?'"

For Buiteweg, that sentiment never changes. She's always looking to balance family and career, and she practices what she preaches.

She left her first firm—where she did landlord-tenant, insurance defense, construction litigation, collections, and family law—

to focus her practice and become an expert in one area. She joined Nichols, Sacks, Slank & Sweet, PC (now Nichols, Sacks, Slank, Sendelbach & Buiteweg, PC), a boutique, all-female family law firm.

"When I spoke with them about their available position, they explained their family-focused culture to me and I immediately knew it would be a perfect fit," she said. "Their philosophy was, 'We can't be taken seriously as a family law firm if we don't pay attention to our own families.'"

Meanwhile, Buiteweg continues to devote a significant amount of her free time to bar association work, which is something she's done for 20 years beginning with the Washtenaw County Young Lawyers Section and Washtenaw County Bar Association and culminating in her new role as State Bar president.

During that time, she's accomplished a great deal, including a Constitution Day project in Washtenaw County, which taught almost 3,000 students about the Constitution; the creation of a Washtenaw County/Eastern Michigan University Legal Resource

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—State Bar President Lori Buiteweg

Center; and helping policymakers make improvements to rules of law affecting the administration of justice.

She is also a big advocate of pro bono work, which she says has given her perhaps her most satisfaction as a lawyer.

“I have helped left-behind parents recover minor children who were removed to other countries against court orders, helped a nonbiological mom gain custody of her adopted daughter, and assisted a father in a pre-*Sanders* case to get his five children out of foster care,” she recalled. “I have also represented survivors of domestic violence pro bono because there are so many barriers to divorce for them.”

Bridging the gap

Buiteweg will bring her passion to her presidency, along with a laundry list of ideas for improving the legal profession.

She is looking forward to working with the Bar’s new 21st Century Practice Task Force to fill gaps in a variety of areas, including the transition from law school to practice and from old methodologies and technology to new, as well as improving policy, diversity, and access to justice.

As for bridging the law school to practice gap, she said she will “encourage more lawyers, and especially those in our Master Lawyers Section, to consider taking on an extern” or a mentee through the Bar’s Mentor Center. While it may seem like a one-sided relationship, she said it’s far from it.

“The beautiful thing about a mentoring relationship between a master and new

lawyer is its mutually beneficial dynamic,” she said. “It can be a symbiotic relationship. For example, after attending a technology seminar at one of our annual meetings, I decided to download an iPad app called Trial Pad. I really didn’t have the time to figure out how to use it before a huge trial I had coming up, so I reached out to Cooley Law School and they provided me with an extern who set up my exhibits in the program and showed me how to use it. The benefit to her was learning how much time and effort it takes to prepare well for a trial and understanding what type of evidence is helpful and why.”

In terms of new techniques and technologies, she said she’d also like to work with the task force “to capitalize on what’s already out there by building a sharing infrastructure where further and ongoing development of these techniques is fostered.”

In addition, she wants to “increase publicity of the school-age Constitution Day and Law Day projects taking place around the state by encouraging lawyers in all our communities to adopt a project and send a clear message to students of all racial and ethnic backgrounds that they are welcome and needed in the legal profession.”

Finally, she stressed the importance of cultivating firms with healthy, happy lawyers.

“We will not attract the brightest and best to our profession if it appears to be a hierarchical parking lot for overworked singles, newlyweds, parents of young children, and unhealthy middle-aged and elderly individuals,” she said. “I would like to challenge firms that have not already done so

to consider widening the path to the boardroom to be more inclusive of lawyers who are motivated to be healthy and have lasting, deeply meaningful family relationships.

“I often find myself focusing more on billing and hours worked than the physical and mental well-being of our attorneys and staff, so I am aware how hard it is to shift the culture. But I try to keep in mind that the stability of my firm is dependent on the overall well-being of its members and have faith that the bills will get paid and everyone will have enough at the end of every month or year to live well.”

Her agenda is aggressive, but if anyone can do it, Buiteweg can.

However, if she could only accomplish one thing as State Bar president, she said it would be “to inspire lawyers to engage in bar association work as a source of energy that will help them renew their faith in themselves and their profession.”

What’s next?

Of course, as all past State Bar presidents know, their year moves quickly. So, what will the Bar look like when she’s done?

“It will look like a friendlier, more helpful, more collaborative community of people doing what they almost certainly set out to do the day they set foot in law school: helping others first and worrying about themselves second,” she said without hesitation.

But what will she do when it’s over?

The answer might lie all the way back in law school, just after the mock trial where she met her husband.

“We later discovered we had both written papers in high school about someday becoming a Supreme Court justice,” she recalled with a wink. ■

Lynn Patrick Ingram is the publications development manager and a legal editor at the State Bar of Michigan. He is a licensed attorney and the former publisher and editor-in-chief of Michigan Lawyers Weekly. Lynn was the 2007 recipient of the Detroit Metropolitan Bar Association’s President’s Award for his dedication to the legal community.