

# Bruce W. Neckers— 67th President, State Bar of Michigan, 2001–2002

By Robert J. Dugan

Her name was Star Huizenga, my last appointment on a Friday afternoon. She was a buxom blond with pancake makeup and a rather gaudy, tight-fitting dress. Her mascara smeared with tears as she told me of the difficulties of being the wife of Reverend Jim Huizenga, a Christian Reformed minister in Byron Center (those of you who know about Grand Rapids' Dutch heritage will know that Byron Center is *very* Dutch and *very* Christian Reformed). Anyway, while Reverend Jim was out of town, Star made one of her frequent trips to a tavern in Muskegon where, out of the sight of her tight-knit Christian Reformed community she could enjoy a little fun and relaxation. Unfortunately, the undercover cop she invited for a night on the town had mistaken her very innocent intent and Star ended up charged with soliciting for prostitution. My work would really be cut out for me on Monday morning and how would I handle the press!

Now about Bruce's wicked sense of humor. Bruce can take it and he can give it. In this case, the only truth about Star Huizenga's tale of woe was that she was, in fact, the wife of a minister—not Christian Reformed, but Reformed Church in America, the more relaxed denomination in which Bruce Neckers has served as an elder, national lay leader, and mediator for most of his life. The rest of her story was totally fabricated. How Bruce coaxed this otherwise demure minister's wife to play the role of her life in my office can only attest to Bruce's persuasive abilities. Anyway, I had pulled some zingers



Front Row (left to right): Bruce Neckers, Susie Neckers. Back Row (left to right): Erin Shag, Matt Neckers, Allison Neckers, Doug Fulton, Melissa Neckers, and Scott VanderLeek in Grand Lake, Colorado.

on Bruce over the years and it was payback time. He got me good.

You get to know a guy very well after spending 30 years with him in the practice of law. You know him as a young man, wet behind the ears, aching to become a great trial lawyer, and then, in the wink of an eye, you are exchanging notes on how to avoid bankruptcy in the planning of your adult daughters' weddings. Well, Bruce did become a trial lawyer of some note and his reputation for excellence, in and out of the courtroom, is extraordinary. Most of us know that you don't have to be a fire breathing, fist pounding, egomaniac to be a great trial lawyer. Bruce has proven that point so well. He is an outstanding trial lawyer and a leader in his church, his local bar association (past presi-

dent), and his law firm, who rarely raises his voice (note that I said *rarely*), who listens, and who thoughtfully considers opposing views. Bruce's upbringing in the small town of Clymer, New York has left him with some very strong values.

Let me go directly to an event in my life that left me with no question about the compassion of this great friend. In 1991, I suffered an abdominal aneurism, which left me permanently in a wheelchair. One of the first people my wife contacted in the middle of this tragedy was Bruce. From that point on, and for the 10 years since, Bruce has devoted countless hours of personal time to making sure that I was ok, my family was ok, my law practice was ok, and that I was not denied any assistance, service, or benefit that would

allow me to continue to practice law in the firm of Rhoades McKee and was able to live a normal life in every possible respect. I am one of many people who have sought Bruce's kindness and counsel at a time of difficulty. There is no one in our law firm who questions why Bruce is usually one of the first to be contacted when someone is facing life-changing, or life-threatening, decisions. It also explains why Bruce is regularly called upon by the Reformed Church in America to act as a mediator when local congregations find themselves mired in controversy. (My regular jokes about the evils of organized religion are my own sinister way of keeping my good friend on edge.)

Bruce's family is a monument to the love and strength of character that epitomize Bruce and Susie Neckers. They have three wonderful children, Matthew, Allison, and of course, Melissa, the middle child who has chosen to follow her father into the practice of law. It is no surprise that they have all ended up as chips off the parental blocks—loving, compassionate, personable, and grounded in strong character and values. As for Susie... she is probably about the nicest person I know. While he did a poor job of choosing a law school (Ohio State), his choice of a wife was superb.

The State Bar of Michigan could not have a better leader, and those who work with Bruce in tackling the many issues facing lawyers in this always more complex world will continue to be amazed at his capacity to inspire, lead, and listen. Bruce is a genuinely good person and no one knows that better than me (and, of course, Star Huizenga). ◆

*By Edward B. Goodrich*

**B**ruce Neckers has been my friend and partner for over 30 years. Our wives have taught school together. Our children have grown to become splendid young adults, thanks in most part to the dedication and wisdom of their mothers. Of course, Bruce should receive some credit, but his wife,



*Melissa Neckers with her parents upon admission to the State Bar of Michigan.*

Susie, should receive the major recognition for raising their three wonderful children.

For many years, as neighbors, Bruce and I also commuted to work together, alternating the driving responsibility. I should confess that this grew out of necessity and had nothing to do with a noble desire to conserve energy. At the time, we both had working wives, growing children, and not enough cars to get everyone where they needed to be each day. On top of this, at this stage of our careers, we were driving used cars that were widely ridiculed for their lack of style, state of disrepair, and abundance of rust. I am sure that as young attorneys starting our new firm, this also impressed our clients.

On the days I drove, Bruce always, in keeping with his calm and considerate demeanor, became an expert in carefully instructing me on the safe operation of a motor vehicle, usually by screaming at me to slow down or watch out for that cement truck that was blocking our way. This is not intended as a criticism of Bruce, since I am sure that his concern was justified and only showed his continuing deep regard for our mutual welfare.

We usually stopped along the way to have breakfast at a restaurant owned by local attor-

ney John Boyles and most often shared a booth and morning newspaper (*Detroit Free Press*) with one of the editors of the *Grand Rapids Press* and his wife. As anyone knows who has a favorite and regular breakfast stop, you must occupy the same booth or table each day or everyone else in the restaurant, in turn, is displaced from their early morning perch. This can be quite upsetting and for some unknown reason, the morning starts out with ruffled feathers and things just don't seem to go as smoothly the rest of the day.

In any event, what a joy to start each day in our informally reserved breakfast booth with good friends, discussing, analyzing, arguing, and solving most of the world's problems before facing the often seemingly insolvable problems and demands of everyday life and the challenges of the legal practice. This early morning ritual could be a key factor in understanding how Bruce has made it this far.

During these years, I watched Bruce grow as a respected and skilled litigator and trusted leader in our firm and our community. Bruce's accomplishments, however, are not merely explained on the basis of his hard work, sound judgment, and dedication to his practice. The real key is that Bruce's private life and public career have always been founded on his faith in God, devotion to his church, love of his family, pride in his profession, his caring for people, and a deep commitment to the administration of justice for betterment of our community. As a lawyer, his integrity, decency, civility, and service have always been admirable and in keeping with the finest traditions of the legal profession and the State Bar of Michigan.

Anyone who knows or has worked with Bruce will tell you that he is one of the most even-tempered and reasonable people you will ever have the pleasure of meeting. However, no person is perfect or without fault, and Bruce is no exception. Sadly, in Bruce's case, this is no ordinary shortcoming, since it involves one of the most important and passionate aspects of our daily lives. Unfortunately, after graduating from Hope College

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in Holland, Michigan, Bruce strayed south of the border and graduated from Ohio State University Law School. The truth is that Bruce is a Buckeye and worst of all, he is proud of it. As a result, when it comes to discussing Big Ten football, Bruce is generally considered to be irrational, biased, and uninformed.

Bruce, listen up. In Michigan, its GO BLUE, GO GREEN, or even GO HOPE. With this kindly and most sincere admonition, I am confident that for the next year Bruce, as our team captain and leader, will keep his focus on the real ball game and will have a highly successful and winning year as our new State Bar president. GO BRUCE. ♦

*By Melissa Neckers*

Long before anyone ever heard of “Take Your Daughter to Work Day,” I had my “day out” with my dad. Each August my brother Matt, my sister Allison, and I would get our own special day with our dad. I had fun going with him to the office, eating lunch at the Pen Club, making photocopies of random objects, typing worksheets for my make-believe school, and generally, wreaking havoc on the office of Mohney, Goodrich and Titta. I think my dad usually tried to pick “days out” when he had very little scheduled, but occasionally I did have an opportunity to watch him in action. What I noticed then, and still notice today when I observe my dad in court, is that he is so genuinely motivated by his desire to do justice that the only difference between his approach to court and to his personal life are the words he uses.

Luckily, my dad has a *lot* of energy because he balances a very busy law practice with dedication to his family. My dad is very committed to his clients and loves his work,

but he was always able to leave it at the office both literally and figuratively. I always knew growing up that he would be home at 6 p.m. for dinner and then be with the family for the night. He only brought work home at night about twice a year and somehow managed to give my mom, my siblings, and me his undivided attention. I don't ever remember my dad missing a violin recital, t-ball game, or school play. He and my mom have also managed to maintain a wonderful relationship and have always treated each other with respect, kindness, humor, and friendship.

Now that I have been a lawyer myself for three years, I realize how difficult it must have been for my dad to constantly keep his priorities straight. I know that there must have been nights before trials when he needed to stay at work another hour or two. Instead, my dad chose to go to work as early as possible rather than infringe on our family time. He still manages to bill a number of hours before I am even awake (even beating the guy who opens the parking garage occasionally).

For the last few years, I have asked my dad over and over, “Why in the world would you want to be president of the State Bar? You don't get paid, you will have to spend two-thirds of your days doing State Bar work, and there is no chance that you are going to be able to keep all 35,000 members happy.” But that is why he is such a unique guy. He isn't motivated by money, prestige, or making

everyone happy. His answer to my question over the past few years has always involved his desire to help make the State Bar a better organization and further the quest for justice. You may have noticed over the last four paragraphs that I am a little biased, but I think the State Bar is incredibly lucky to have such a hard working president for the next year and also one who has accepted the responsibility because he is consistently motivated by what he believes is right. ♦

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