

By Naseem Stecker

# An Interview with Reginald M. Turner

## 68TH PRESIDENT OF THE STATE BAR

### Could you give me some background and personal/family information?

I was born and raised in Detroit. My late father was in law enforcement and my mother works for the Detroit Public Library. Dad ran a number of law enforcement agencies. He was a Deputy Chief in the Detroit Police Department, Public Safety Director in Cleveland, Ohio, and Chief of Police in Pontiac, Michigan. I have two sisters and one brother, all of whom still live in Michigan. I graduated from Cass Technical High School, went to Wayne State University and to the University of Michigan Law School. After law school, I clerked for Dennis Archer at the Michigan Supreme Court for two years and then joined the Sachs Waldman law firm where I practiced labor and employment law for about ten years. In 1996, I went to Washington, D.C. for a year and worked in the Clinton Administration as a White House Fellow. In 2000, I joined Clark Hill where I practice labor and employment law and advocate for clients on public policy matters.

### Why did you decide to become a lawyer?

I have a firm belief in our American system of justice and a strong desire to improve it. One goal has been to pursue better labor-management relations through the practice of law. I am also attracted to the law as an intellectual challenge.

### Do you have any role models? Has anyone inspired you?

I have many role models—Dennis Archer has been an inspiration to me in terms of public service, service to the Bar, service to the community, and devotion to family. U.S. Court of Appeals Judge Damon Keith has been a great influence in these areas too. My former partner, Tom Lenga, helped to shape my understanding of the importance of our profession in our community. He also inspired my transition to Clark Hill. Judge Victoria Roberts is a great jurist and an excellent role model for Bar and community service. In fact, I have learned a great deal from many State Bar presidents in the last several years, and I am grateful to them for their leadership and service: Bruce Neckers, Thomas Ryan, Alfred Butzbaugh, Edward Brady, Thomas Kienbaum, George Googasian, Fred Woodworth, James Robinson, Jon Muth, George Roumell, Jr., and my partners Robert Webster and Patrick Keating have all personally mentored me. I also give much credit to my former law firm—Sachs Waldman. Theodore Sachs was its president and one of the finest lawyers in Michigan. Ted and the firm's other labor division partners took the time to train me in the firm's distinguished tradition. Jennifer Granholm is also an inspirational role model. She is a lawyer-statesperson of the highest order.



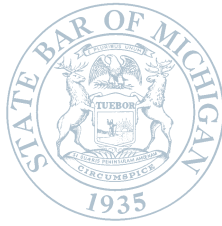
Photo: Michael M. Smith

### As an African American did you face any barriers on the road to becoming a lawyer?

Race is still a factor in American life. I don't dwell on my own anecdotal experiences but I have certainly felt the sting of overt prejudice. Fortunately, a lot of men and women of all races have labored mightily to increase opportunities that benefit my peers and me today. I will continue efforts to break down barriers that exist for people of color and women in our society.

### Do you think that there are adequate opportunities for minorities in the profession?

I'm very proud of the fact that the State Bar of Michigan continues to support an open justice system to provide opportunities for



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people of color, women, and diverse religious and ethnic groups to be full participants in the mainstream of our profession. There is still a lot of work to do.

**Affirmative action in university admissions and hiring, which has always been controversial, faces a legal challenge. A number of federal courts have rejected such programs while others have supported it and many people predict that the Supreme Court will use the U of M case to resolve the issue. How do you think the Supreme Court will rule?**

I have spent the last four and half years working as pro bono counsel for the African American and Latino students who are interveners in the undergraduate case, *Gratz v Bollinger*, involving the University of Michigan College of Literature, Science, and the Arts. We are supporting the University's arguments that it has a compelling interest in creating a diverse student environment and that its affirmative action program is a narrowly-tailored means to achieve a diverse student environment. Those arguments are supported by the opinion of the U.S. Supreme Court in *University of California Regents v Bakke*. In addition to supporting the University's position, the interveners have also asserted that affirmative action remains a reasonable and necessary means to remedy the present effects of past and present racial discrimination. The lawyers on the case, including counsel for the university and counsel for other civil rights organizations, think this case will have a tremendous impact on equality of opportunity under the law in all of our public and private institutions.

**How do you think the Supreme Court will rule?**

I've been a lawyer long enough to know better than to predict the outcome of a case.

**What will be the consequences if it rules that these affirmative action programs are unconstitutional?**

Our society would become even more segregated on the basis of race. An adverse decision would further polarize our nation at a time when unity, tolerance of diversity, and meaningful opportunities are critical to our continued development as a great society, and vital to our national security.

**You're very involved in civic and public service projects, both in Detroit and nationally; can you describe some of these programs and explain why you're drawn to them?**

I serve in the American Bar Association and the National Bar Association as an extension of our Bar work here in Michigan. I serve on the Detroit Board of Education because I believe that im-

proving public education is one of the great challenges of the 21st century. Over the last 30 to 40 years, there has been a steady decline in the quality of education for students in our metropolitan cities. We have to reverse that trend and help to ensure that our young people have adequate education so they can understand the American dream, embrace the American dream, and become full participants in our society. I serve on the Board and Executive Committee of United Way Community Services, which serves over 100 organizations that provide assistance to families throughout Michigan. I serve as vice chair of the Detroit Institute of Arts and my wife, Marcia, serves on the Detroit Institute of Arts Founder's Junior Council Board of Directors. We want as many people as possible exposed to the beautiful works of art at the museum. I chair the City of Detroit's Board of Ethics, because I helped draft the ethics ordinance and I believe its successful implementation bodes well for the quality of government in our city.

**1996/97 were special years—A White House Fellowship, touring South Africa and Mozambique—could you recount those days for me? What did you learn from that experience?**

We planned an international delegation to explore political and economic issues in South Africa, which had recently turned to democracy and the rule of law to enfranchise all of its citizens. We also wanted to examine what had been occurring in Mozambique in the aftermath of a 17-year civil war, where a democratic government is now attempting to rebuild under the rule of law. Our journey began in Johannesburg and Pretoria, went to Cape Town, Durban, and Ulundi. One of the most disturbing things to me about South Africa was the huge disparity in living conditions that resulted from the apartheid system. People of color were legally relegated to the worst possible settlements. It makes one appreciate freedom and democracy. In Mozambique, the thing that struck me most was the devastation of that country as a result of this proxy fight between former colonial powers of the West and the former Soviet Union. Most of the country's institutions were literally and figuratively in ruins—roads and bridges blown up or knocked out. There were land mines across the agricultural landscape of the country. I watched a de-mining operation, with soldiers painstakingly crawling inch by inch across fields, using mine detectors, so that farming could resume. I was horrified by the devastation and the destruction of this war.

**Do you keep in touch in any way with what has been going on there?**

I do. My church, Fellowship Chapel, has helped. After the floods, which occurred in late 2000/early 2001, we provided assistance to the flood victims in Mozambique. We also made some contributions to the de-mining operations. One of the tragic results of the flood was that some areas that had been de-mined were now dangerous again because mines were loosened by the floodwaters. I also continue to have contact with some of the people that I met over in South Africa, including the leadership of the Bafokeng Tribe, which provided



us with hospitality while we were there. I monitor issues that arise for President Tabo Mbeki's government as he attempts to implement many of the reforms that were promised when democracy was restored in South Africa.

**Let's switch gears here and talk about matters closer to home. The Bar has been actively surveying members—for the Strategic Plan, the Visionary Committee, and the Bar Journal—what is our membership telling us and are we responding appropriately?**

The members are telling us that they want the Bar to help them be more successful in providing high quality service to their clients in a cost-efficient way. They want us to address public policy issues that are central to the administration of justice, not unduly divisive, and on which the Bar can achieve impact either in the legislature or with the Supreme Court regarding court rules and legislation. They want us to support Access to Justice and Open Justice. They want us to run the Bar with sound fiscal management and cost-efficient services to lawyers and the public. Our strategic plan encompasses all of those things. I'm very proud of the fact that Dadie Perlov, the consultant who helped us develop our strategic plan, came back to view our progress and said that we are among the organizations with whom she has worked that successfully implemented their strategic plans. Our Bar used to be an organization that changed its focus from year to year as officers changed. Now, with our strategic plan, we are focused for the long term on the needs of members and the public.

**Which aspects of the plan will you be concentrating on as president?**

As a team, our leadership at the Bar, the executive director, the staff, the officers, and the Board of Commissioners, are devoted to the entire Strategic Plan. We are not going to pick and choose which parts of it we like and which parts we don't like. There was an arduous process to create the strategic plan. We owe it to those who gave their time, energy, and ideas to implement it, and not to pick and choose those things that are easier to do or more popular with narrow constituencies.

**What's the current financial picture of the State Bar of Michigan?**

We're healthy. We have a balanced budget. Our reserves probably should be a bit stronger, but we're going to work very hard to address that in the coming year. We have put into place additional management controls to ensure that all of our members have confidence that the resources of the Bar are being managed in an efficient and effective way.

**What will the focus of Justice Initiatives be?**

The focus will be to develop the synergies between Access to Justice and Open Justice, making both more effective. On the Access to Justice side, we decided to focus on the things we do well to sup-

port legal services. They include raising money through the Access to Justice Development Campaign and providing technological support to legal services programs around the state. We found that we weren't playing as constructive a role in trying to manage the delivery of legal services to the poor. We can certainly be a part of the team that helps to consider major issues regarding delivery of legal services. Before strategic planning we had a lot of staff that were really involved in nuts and bolts decision-making on legal services delivery. We went from a total of eight staff to four and one-half positions now, and I think we're supporting legal services more than ever.

**What about the relationship between Access to Justice and Open Justice?**

The concept of Justice Initiatives will develop the synergies that exist between our Access to Justice efforts and our Open Justice efforts. Access to Justice is designed to ensure equal access to the justice system regardless of economic status. Open Justice is designed to ensure access to the justice system regardless of superficial variables like gender, race, or ethnic origin. We will coordinate our resources so that we get the maximum impact from our investment in this worthwhile effort.

**Critics of the Bar say, amongst other things, that it's elitist and that it needs to do more to advocate on behalf of lawyers. How do you respond to comments like that?**

I would encourage all of our members to look at our public policy agenda. The key points of our public policy agenda relate to the independence of the justice system and the independence of the legal profession so that the public receives all of the benefits of our American system of justice. Often when we are really effective, some harmful proposals never emerge from legislative committees, so they don't get a lot of attention and members might not become aware of the Bar's efforts. We have worked hard to prevent unnecessary, burdensome regulation of lawyers and the justice system. We are constantly working on behalf of our profession with the Michigan Supreme Court and with the legislature.

**How can the State Bar work more closely with local and special purpose bars?**

We work pretty closely with them now. The president of the Bar, our executive director, and a committee of members and staffers visit with and work on programs with many local and special purpose bar associations across the state. We hold the Bar Leadership Institute each year, which helps their leaders understand the role of the State Bar and develop their leadership styles as they prepare to lead. So we're doing quite a lot. We can always do more to enhance our relationships with members around the state. We're reaching out to our members through more direct involvement with the sections of the Bar. We've made tremendous progress in the last six months on that. We involved the sections in the Bar Leadership Forum for the very first time this year and the feedback from the sections and from the local bar leaders has been very positive.



# About Reggie...

"I was looking for law clerks and Wade McCree was kind enough to recommend Reggie Turner. Reggie was a very bright law student and a very bright young lawyer. He had the ability to see the big picture—to appreciate the fact that although he personally might believe the outcome of a decision might go one way, he nevertheless, was willing to look beyond to see if there was perhaps a reason to carve out an exception if necessary. When researching the law as a clerk, he was a devotee of the law, that is to say, he had a high respect for case precedent and respected the value of stare decisis. Reggie loves the law. He loves people. He is good at what he does. He is a very talented lawyer and the future is very bright for him... Reggie, in my view, has the potential [should he decide to do so, at a time that is right for him, if he is willing to make the sacrifice,] to be an excellent public servant whether that be mayor, governor, secretary of state, or attorney general."

**Hon. Dennis W. Archer, president-elect, American Bar Association, former Mayor of Detroit and justice of the Michigan Supreme Court**

"I have known Reggie Turner since he graduated from the University of Michigan Law School. I knew from the first time that I met him that he was a superstar and, ever since that time, the life that he has lived in the legal profession and, in the community, has verified my thoughts. He is a great lawyer, a wonderful family man with his wife and his children, deeply committed to the community and wants to make change for the better. He is committed to equal justice under law and I, as a Black man, am just proud to see that we have young men coming along who will continue to keep the torch of freedom going and, Reggie certainly will do that. I am thrilled that the lawyers in the state of Michigan have

honored him with their highest honor to make him president of the State Bar of Michigan."

**Hon. Damon J. Keith, U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals, Detroit**

"Reginald Turner is continuing Clark Hill's tradition of Bar leadership, which includes three State Bar presidents in recent history. His experience in a wide variety of professional environments, from the city of Detroit to the White House, and his dedication to public service, makes him eminently qualified to lead the State Bar. We are proud of his many accomplishments, proud to have him as a member of Clark Hill, and proud to support him as the new president of the State Bar of Michigan."

**John Hern, Clark Hill CEO**

"In the 14 years that I have known Reggie, I have rarely encountered anyone who has such a combination of talents: intelligence, passion, focus, command of the language, and commitment. When he first began his career as law clerk to the Honorable Dennis Archer, he contacted me, and wanted to know all there was to know about the Wolverine Bar Association. Even then, he had set his sights on becoming president of that organization and knew that he wanted to emulate the example of Justice Archer to become president of the State Bar of Michigan. I would have to say that despite his youth, Reggie's star has been rising for many years; and, despite his numerous accomplishments, his prominence in our community has just begun. Given his talents, his vigor and enthusiasm, and his many years of planning, I have no doubt that Reggie will be an outstanding president of the State Bar of Michigan. This, too, will prove to be only another beginning for him."

**Hon. Victoria A. Roberts, U.S. District Judge, Federal Court, Detroit**

## You work in a large firm, but the majority of Michigan lawyers are small or solo practitioners. What is the Bar doing to help this group?

The last three presidents have all worked in firms with fewer than 50 lawyers. Two of the last three have been in firms of five lawyers or less. We've had lawyers from large firms and sole practitioners as presidents of the State Bar of Michigan. Accordingly, there is recognition among the leadership of the Bar of the diversity of members' practice settings. Our Strategic Plan envisions even more aggressive efforts to provide practical assistance to lawyers in their offices, at their desks, with technological support, research support, and practice tips that will enable them to deliver higher quality legal services to their clients in a more cost-efficient way in small, medium, and large firms.

## What issues should lawyers pay special attention to in the 21st century?

Improve the administration of justice; ensure the independence of the judiciary, protect the public as we work to prevent the unauthorized practice of law; regulate multi-disciplinary and multi-jurisdictional practice to ensure that the highest quality standards are met; enhance access to justice for people who traditionally have been disenfranchised.

## What do you want to be remembered for?

I want to be remembered as one member of a team that successfully implemented the Strategic Plan so that we can be more effective in serving our members and the public.

## What are some of your thoughts on the profession of law? Is the field very over crowded?

No. Right now in America we meet only about 20 percent of the need for legal services to the poor. I think there needs to be even greater access to the justice system and to the advice and counsel of attorneys so that people understand their rights and their responsibilities. I think that lawyers serve an important role in our justice system and in my humble opinion, the more lawyers that we have, the more justice is dispensed more widely.

## Do you have any interest in running for political office?

Right now I'm focused on implementing the State Bar's Strategic Plan. Doing well at the task at hand prepares one to take on more important tasks in the future. ♦

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