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CHICAGO LAWYER

What's a presidency worth?: Why bar association hopefuls spend time, energy and money for a shot at even more work

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The Chicago area and Illinois more broadly boast dozens of bar associations for attorneys to join — general organizations representing the interests of all lawyers within a region and affinity organizations formed to meet needs of attorneys who find themselves minorities in the workplace whether due to their race, gender, religion or sexual orientation.

The presidents of these organizations find themselves in the special position of not only having to provide development opportunities and guidance to members, but shaping the legal profession across the state.

So why would an attorney or judge spend time, energy and resources just to take on more responsibility? We asked a few.

'I had no one to ask'

Juan Morado, the newly installed president of the Hispanic Lawyers Association of Illinois, credited the association for his career trajectory so far. Morado, a health-care attorney with Benesch Friedlander Coplan & Aronoff, said the association provided mentorship to him beginning back at IIT Chicago-Kent College of Law.

Recalling the first time he had to write a legal memo as a first year, Morado said his association mentor was the only person he could ask for help — Morado had no family or close family friends who were attorneys.

"I had no one to ask, 'Can you take a look at this, can you review this?'" he said. "[HLAI] was a support system. It was something that gave me the chance to see folks who look like me and came from the communities that I came from be successful and lean on them for support when I needed it most."

Morado stayed involved with Hispanic Lawyers Association through law school, into his first job in the city of Chicago's Office of Corporation Counsel and later working for state government, eventually serving as deputy chief of staff for Gov. Pat Quinn. Both in government service and in private practice, Morado said he sees the need for more opportunities for Latino attorneys.

One of Morado's big goals for his year as association president is expanding the organization's mentorship program not just to law students, but prelaw students in college — even high schoolers. Morado said it's important for Hispanic Lawyers Association to shepherd Latinos in the law profession to create a pipeline of successful attorneys who will serve in leadership roles. Later on in those attorneys' careers, Morado said the association should be pushing interested lawyers to go for judgeships.

"It's not like it was 30 years ago when you might be able to say, 'Well, there's not enough ... folks with the credentials,'" Morado said. "There's nothing further from the truth now. We have increasing numbers of Latinos who are in the profession, who have the experience, the ability and just need the opportunities to prove themselves."

Aside from mentoring, the Hispanic Lawyers Association and organizations like it do place an emphasis on networking with attorneys from different areas of the law, which can often lead to more business for attorneys in private practice. But even as association president, Morado said he hasn't noticed a boost in business, but that's not his focus as president anyway, he said. Morado joked that "maybe I'm not doing it the right way."

"Coming from government, I'm just learning how to do that whole business development thing as I go along now," he said.

'If they know your name ... '

While the Hispanic Lawyers Association is a newer, smaller bar association, the Illinois State Bar Association has a 141-year history and boasts a membership of at least 30,000 attorneys from around the state. The association's newest president, DuPage County Associate Judge James McCluskey, said he sees his role as the leader as an advocate for lawyers across Illinois, no matter their practice area or specific job.

McCluskey, who has had a long career in both insurance defense and commercial litigation, said one of his primary goals in the next year as president is expanding the availability of mental health services and other services provided to attorneys through the Illinois Lawyers' Assistance Program.

"The need is great and the resources are limited," he said. "[It's] not only funding. I think there needs to be more education for lawyers about the issues related to addiction, mental disease, stress, depression, anxiety and what services are available to assist them in making their lives better."

McCluskey's other driving goal for the year is the passage of Illinois Supreme Court rules that would motivate firms — especially solo practices or smaller operations — to put together a plan of succession for their businesses. Iowa, for example, already has these rules, and his association has drafted similar rules that are currently ready for review by the Illinois Supreme Court's Committee of Professional Responsibility.

Through his time in the business, McCluskey said he's encountered attorneys who have had sudden illnesses and no plans for succession of the firms they own and operate. By chance, McCluskey himself is preparing to extricate himself from his Lisle-based, 30-attorney firm Momkus McCluskey, as he was recently sworn in as a judge in DuPage County. But McCluskey said that he and his partners sat down several years ago and began thinking through a succession plan.

"It's all about the client," he said. "That's what the protection of the Illinois Supreme Court is interested in: to safeguard the client's interest."

Though immediate past president Russ Hartigan actually stepped down from his judgeship to lead the organization, McCluskey did not make a similar promise while campaigning. Of all the bar associations in Illinois, the Illinois State Bar Association has the most intense campaigning process. Hopefuls run hard-fought — and expensive — campaigns for third vice president in order to become president four years down the road.

McCluskey said it's not a contentious one, pointing to own third vice president run against Ariano Hardy Ritt Nyuli Richmond Lytle & Goettel partner Lisa Nyuli in 2014.

"She's a wonderful individual," he said. "We were friends before and we're still friends today."

Asked if he noticed an increase in business when he joined the association's leadership, McCluskey said that while he's never sat down to calculate it, he knows it's had "a definite impact."

"The more exposure you get, the more name recognition you get, and then the more name recognition you get, people have a client or they say, 'Oh, I need some help in DuPage County for a lawyer who does commercial litigation' ... if they know your name and you get that exposure, that's how it happens."

'I don't think it would help you get slated'

While The Chicago Bar Association must keep its appeal general for attorneys who practice in all areas of law, one of the goals immediate past president Cook County Associate Judge Thomas Mulroy had for the organization last year was finding ways to serve Chicagoans in neighborhoods affected by gun violence and poverty.

“We have to take our talents, as LeBron [James] said, and take them out into the communities,” Mulroy quipped.

Mulroy pointed to an event the CBA held where dozens of attorneys were made available to people in certain South Side neighborhoods and said residents were mostly interested in help with wills and trusts, matrimonial law and divorce. A few even requested entertainment lawyers to help protect the talents of young people trying to make it in the music industry.

“There are two systems of justice,” Mulroy said. “One is for the people who can write checks for \$100,000 to their lawyers every month, and the rest of us.”

Under Mulroy’s leadership, the CBA also published a report titled “The Future of the Practice of Law in Chicago,” in which the organization made recommendations based on months of research and surveys into five areas of the local legal profession. The 65-page report delves into areas like attorneys’ mental health and diversity and inclusion — two issues Mulroy said were important to address during his tenure as CBA president.

The CBA and other organizations like it boast many prominent lawyers both among its ranks and in leadership and some of those attorneys go on to run for political office. Jesse Ruiz, a partner at Drinker Biddle & Reath, ran in the Democratic primary for attorney general. Ruiz is a past president of the Hispanic Lawyers Association of Illinois and a CBA vice president.

But Mulroy said he hasn’t seen attorneys join leadership within the CBA purely for political gain.

“I don’t see being [an officer] ... as being helpful to become a politician,” Mulroy said. “I don’t think it would help you get votes, I don’t think it would help you get slated.”

The CBA, however, is not entirely divorced from the political process, as it takes positions on legislation that affects the legal profession or justice. But perhaps no two bar associations in Illinois are as well-known for their activism on legislation than the two organizations representing the plaintiffs bar and the civil defense bar: the Illinois Trial Lawyers Association and the Illinois Association of Defense Trial Counsel.

‘We don’t exist without the other’

Mark Prince, owner of Marion-based Prince Law Firm, was installed as the new president of trial lawyers association in June, and said he acknowledges his association and its members have been maligned over the years. During his gubernatorial run in 2014 and earlier in tenure in office, Gov. Bruce Rauner would frequently blame the trial lawyers association for its role in Illinois’ high cost of workers’ compensation claims.

Prince, of course, disputes that claim, and points to the 2011 rewrite of the Illinois Workers’ Compensation Act. The association was involved in crafting the measure, which lowered workers’ compensation costs by 30 percent. Asked if he feels a responsibility as association president to boost his bar group’s reputation in Illinois, Prince said his first responsibility is always to plaintiffs who need trial lawyers’ help.

“Well, we always want to improve our public perception, but we are not going to do that to the extent of sacrificing what our mission is, which is to protect those injured workers and those injured people,” Prince said. “The one thing we are most definite about is we’re not going to stand by and let big corporate entities put profits over people.”

Defense Trial Counsel President Bradley Nahrstadt, a name partner at Lipe Lyons Murphy Nahrstadt & Pontikis said he doesn’t view his organization as actively in opposition to the trial lawyers’ association and its mission.

“We don’t exist without the other,” Nahrstadt said. “I hear defense attorneys a lot of times [say], ‘Oh, I hate plaintiffs attorneys.’ And I never understand that because if there aren’t plaintiffs attorneys, there aren’t defense attorneys and vice versa.”

Both men said they felt called to leadership within their respective organizations because they felt passionate about their areas of the law and knew that being active within either group could help shape the legal profession on either side of the bar.

“I am where I am at now in my professional life because people have come before me and they have sacrificed time away from their practice and time away from their families, and frankly probably sacrificed income to do what needed to be done for our clients,” Prince said. “I feel an obligation that I need to do the same thing for the younger generation [of lawyers] coming up. All that, in turn, protects the little guy when he’s hurt by someone else’s negligence.”

Nahrstadt agreed, saying he also felt an obligation to lead because of the help he has received from his group since he was a young lawyer in the early 1990s. But he did say that he feels he's received at least some work as a result of being in leadership within the defense attorneys' association.

"I've heard from some folks involved who have been past presidents who have said that during their year as president, they did wind up getting business because of the visibility that they had," Nahrstadt said. "It can't hurt and I have seen some of that, but for me it's more about: I want to give back to and help the people that do what I do."

'Hopefully, they pass it on'

Some bar associations are focused neither on general interest or a certain area of law, but about serving a local community. Rick Pullano, owner of the injury firm Pullano Law Offices, is a member of both trial lawyers and state bar associations. But the Glenview resident said that it's important for him to serve the community in which he resides.

Pullano, whose term as North Suburban Bar Association president ends in September, is especially passionate about reaching young people to teach them that the law is a "noble and honorable profession."

The North Suburban Bar Association has for years put on an annual mock trial program for area high school students in which real judges and attorneys volunteer their time to judge the students' performances in the Skokie courthouse.

Between that effort and outreach to young attorneys, Pullano said one of his overarching focuses as association president has been to impact young people — whether still in school or new to the profession.

"I just felt so strongly that if we can influence the young and impact their career early on, it pays huge dividends for all of us, and hopefully they pass it on when they get more experience down the road," he said.

Of all these storied bar associations, the Cook County Bar Association has one of the most celebrated pasts of any local legal organization in Chicago or Illinois.

The association was born out of a collective of 32 African-American lawyers in Chicago, who in 1896 banded together to plan protests against racial discrimination in hotels, restaurants and schools. In 1914, the coalition was formalized and became the Cook County Bar Association.

Administrative Law Judge Urie Clark said one of his main goals as association president is the development of young people within the bar association and also expanding the group's mission through expanding its platform. Clark said the bar association has added a LGBTQ committee in recent years, which has helped those lawyers find a true "home" within the organization. Clark said that's an expansion of the association's original purpose.

"Now 104 years later, we continue that mission," Clark said. "We fight racial discrimination because it continues in the forefront of this nation and always has, along with discrimination against nationality, gender, sexual orientation and religion."

Clark has been involved with the association for nearly four decades — nearly the entirety of his legal career.

Clark said he's reminded of a portrait that used to hang in his office while in private practice for many years: A painting of one hand reaching down to help another hand up.

"It's actually my service that pleases me the most," Clark said. "Working a job, OK fine — I go work several hours and get paid. But when I come back and do something in the community and for my lawyers, my fellow legal community that has helped me so far along in my career, my whole plan is to give back."