

Meet NJSBA 2023-2024 President Tim McGoughran

In his first year of law school, Timothy F. McGoughran ran for president of the student bar association without the slightest idea of what it meant to be a leader.

Nearly four decades later, having added several impressive titles to his resume—president of the Monmouth Bar Association, chair of New Jersey State Bar Association’s Family Law Section, municipal court judge—he’s

bership, bolstering and promoting member benefits, and furthering the Association’s advocacy on issues that matter to everyone in the profession like the state’s judicial vacancy crisis and attorney wellness.

“There are all sorts of issues to make sure we stay vibrant and continue to be the number one voice for lawyers in New Jersey,” McGoughran said.

and child custody to asset protection and domestic violence cases. It’s a grueling, often emotionally taxing line of work that takes a delicate balance of thick skin and compassion to navigate, McGoughran said. The common thread in all his cases is that each one presents a problem that needs solving and an opportunity to shepherd clients through a difficult period.

“They say in criminal law you see

aspects of practicing law to a break-neck speed, but efficiency comes at a cost, McGoughran said.

“I’m a big believer in personal contact, picking up the phone over sending an email. A phone call should always start with, ‘How are you doing?’ and, ‘How’s the family?’” McGoughran said. “Now more than ever, it’s vital to create relationships in a world of texts and emails.”



much more comfortable in the role and understands the great honor that comes with leading the Association.

“My belief is that if I’m going to be involved with a cause or organization, I might as well join the leadership if I can. That puts you in position to promote your ideas and learn from the best people. There’s no better group of people to learn from than the bar leadership,” McGoughran said.

The philosophy has prepared him well for his upcoming term as president of the NJSBA for 2023–2024. This week at the Annual Meeting and Convention in Atlantic City, McGoughran will take the reins following the most tumultuous period for the practice of law in recent memory, spurred by a pandemic that left an indelible mark on the profession, with the expansion of remote work, virtual courtrooms and new ways to interact with clients.

Now that the dust from the pandemic has settled, and many attorneys have transitioned to a new normal, McGoughran plans to focus his term on going “back to basics” to help members. That means boosting mem-

bering, bolstering and promoting member benefits, and furthering the Association’s advocacy on issues that matter to everyone in the profession like the state’s judicial vacancy crisis and attorney wellness. Outgoing NJSBA President Jeralyn L. Lawrence, who made examining attorney wellness the centerpiece of her tenure, said McGoughran shares the same passion. He is the perfect candidate to step in and further the work of the Putting Lawyers First Task Force, which produced a wide-ranging report on the state of attorney mental health and wellness in New Jersey, the primary drivers of stress for attorneys and an action plan to improve well-being, she said.

“I can’t think of a more capable, passionate and committed person to the lead the Association,” Lawrence said. “He will be a fabulous president who continues to put attorney wellness at the forefront and advocates for a healthier profession.”

A personal touch

McGoughran plies his trade as the founding member of the Law Office of Timothy F. McGoughran, a family law firm he manages in Ocean Township with his wife, Allison. He provides counsel on all aspects of family law, from divorce proceedings, alimony

bad people at their best, and in family law you see good people at their worst,” McGoughran said. “Usually when you talk to someone like me for the first time, your life is not in a good spot.”

“There’s nothing better than when I have an initial consult with someone and they tell me what their problem is, and as they’re talking and I’m taking notes, I can immediately see how this will resolve itself, whether that’s through negotiation or litigation,” McGoughran said. “It’s nice when a plan comes together to help someone get out of a jam. Because in this business, everyone is in a jam.”

A typical day managing a law firm starts at 8:30 a.m. with a plan that often gets derailed within an hour, McGoughran said. Before the pandemic he appeared in the Monmouth County Courthouse at least three days a week. Now his days are filled with a continuous stream of virtual consultations and mediation sessions that dominate one of his dual monitors, while emails pour in on the other screen.

Technology has accelerated some

Consensus builder

Meeting people has always been McGoughran’s strong suit. Ask Steve Robinson, who met McGoughran on the barbecue line at Seton Hall Law School’s orientation. After a brief conversation, they were roommates.

“I didn’t know him at all, but we started talking about our living situation and he just asked, ‘Would you like to live together?’ And I said, ‘Sure, why not?’ That began a 40-year friendship,” Robinson said.

Even then, McGoughran had the earmarks of a great leader, he said.

“There are two things that will make Tim an effective president. One is his ability to pursue consensus on issues. His personality brings people together to a common goal,” Robinson said. “The other is his willingness to do the hard work. People see that and are willing to follow.”

McGoughran will become the third straight Seton Hall Law School alum to serve as NJSBA president, following Lawrence and Domenick Carmagnola. He remembers orientation day for the class of 1986 and the dean’s

address about the rigors of law school. The dean asked students to look to their left, then right, and reminded the class some will likely drop out short of graduating.

“My joke was, ‘Why’s everyone looking at me?’” McGoughran said.

Future NJSBA President Karol Corbin Walker, who served 2003–2004, was in the same class of graduates. She and McGoughran mixed like oil and water at first, in part because he ran an intense campaign against her for student bar president, complete with buttons, flyers and stickers. He won that race, Walker said, but his tenacity and congenial nature served him well as a class representative.

“When we were in law school, it was easy to see that Tim was a leader. He was the type of person who would speak up for other students,” Walker said. “We helped each other, as well as other students, to raise our level of excellence and ensure that we all did well.”

On his future as NJSBA president, Walker added, “I know he will give us his all. He will present our issues to the Supreme Court, to the Legislature, to our congressional district, in a way

of their companions.

“That was my first real touch with trying cases,” McGoughran said. “The guy I went against was a senior named George Popovich, because you never forget your first loss.”

During closing arguments, Popovich pulled a savvy move and turned off the library lights to put jurors in the mindset of the survivors. The verdict didn’t go his way, but McGoughran said the experience has since inspired him to volunteer as a judge with the New Jersey State Bar Foundation’s mock trial program for the last 20 years.

McGoughran went on to graduate from the University of Pittsburgh in 1982 with a degree in political science. He took a year off before attending Seton Hall Law School with no concept of what type of law he would practice.

“I never really went to law school thinking I would be a divorce lawyer,” McGoughran said. “I did a juvenile justice clinic for two years, which I enjoyed. But I really took an interest in family law when I got a clerkship with Judge Bob (Robert) O’Hagan in Monmouth County.”

NJSBA advocacy

Right out of law school, McGoughran joined the NJSBA’s Young Lawyers Division, then the Monmouth Bar Association, where he became president in 2007 for the organization’s 100th anniversary. The next goal was to join the NJSBA’s Board of Trustees and eventually the Association’s Executive Committee.

“I didn’t go to high school out here or have many family or friend connections. My bar involvement has been great for that,” he said. “I tell people it’s a business model. Much of my practice is referrals from lawyers and clients. If you walk into a room of 50 people, there are at least three or four causes of action out there. Someone has a legal problem. It’s your job to go find it.”

McGoughran’s work with the State Bar has offered some of the proudest moments of his career. His first major project with the Family Law Section was crafting a custody bill for military deployed overseas. The bill, which eventually became law, guaranteed that a service member’s time away from family for deployment would not impact their child custody rights.

In 2017, McGoughran argued the

His keynote project, however, is a new committee to create uniformity in mental health diversionary programs in the state. Serving as a municipal court judge, he saw firsthand how substance abuse and mental health issues are among the primary drivers of crime for lower-level criminals.

“There are many people who aren’t necessarily bad people, but are just in a bad spot and the criminal justice system is not equipped to handle them,” McGoughran said. “They become a revolving door in the system and keep reoffending because they can’t help it.”

Some counties, like Essex and Union, have well-established initiatives that divert defendants with a history of diagnosed mental illness to treatment programs either as an alternative to or in conjunction with incarceration. The programs are designed to create a path where qualifying individuals can obtain long-term treatment and break the cycle of arrests. The problem is that these programs are inconsistent from county to county and maintain different levels of service. As a result, defendants can fall through the cracks and not get the treatment they need, he said.



that inures to our benefit. Tim’s a fighter, and we will have a great fighter in him as president.”

From humble beginnings

Becoming an attorney seemed like a pipe dream growing up a middle child of four in Roslyn Farms, a small town outside Pittsburgh.

The town had about 200 families with no gas station or convenience store, McGoughran said. He went to class in an old, four-room school and walked home every day for lunch. His father was a plumbing supply salesman and his mother a homemaker.

“Think Norman Rockwell,” McGoughran said of his quiet community.

It was a comfortable upbringing, but there were no attorneys in the family to serve as a guidepost. McGoughran’s first taste of practicing law came during high school, when he took a business law class that hosted a mock trial in the library. He was the prosecutor in a grizzly case involving a group of survivors who were stuck in a cave and ended up cannibalizing one

From there he went to work for Philip Jacobowitz, a prominent matrimonial lawyer in South Jersey, who ran a boutique matrimonial firm with four or five attorneys. The practice was a great incubator, and he met his wife who worked there as an office manager, McGoughran said.

But with few other contacts in New Jersey, he turned to state and local bar organizations to make inroads and build his reputation.

Mitchell Ansell, an old friend from his clerking days, said he and McGoughran would compete over who could meet the most judges at bar dinners. They called it schmoozing, an opportunity for McGoughran to show off his gift of gab.

“The qualities that Tim had, back then and still to this day, is that he’s so personable, so social, so endearing, that by the end of the dinner he knew more people there than I did,” Ansell said. “He’s passionate about being a lawyer, he’s passionate about helping lawyers and wanting to make the practice of law a better practice for everybody.”

NJSBA’s *amicus curiae* position before the state Supreme Court in *Bisbing v. Bisbing*, a seminal family law case that set a new standard for divorced parents to relocate their children out of state. It was an exciting yet nerve-racking experience to appear before the Court, McGoughran said. The week prior, the Family Law Section held its annual retreat.

“What’s better than hosting 200 people in Cancun on one week, and the very next week you’re arguing before the Supreme Court?” McGoughran said. “Only through the State Bar do I have those opportunities.”

Plans as president

As for the year ahead, McGoughran plans to continue the NJSBA’s advocacy on several important issues: reducing the statute of limitations in professional malpractice cases to two years, implementing the wellness recommendations of the Putting Lawyers First Task Force and lobbying the Legislature and governor to address the state’s judicial vacancy crisis, which stands at nearly 60 vacancies.

“I’ve always been a big proponent of drug court and recovery court. The low recidivism rates of those speaks for themselves. People are half as likely to commit another crime after they complete these programs,” McGoughran said. “One of the biggest tenets of criminal law is rehabilitation. If you can rehabilitate someone into a law-abiding citizen, that’s better than deterrence or punishment.”

Along with a committee to study the issue and make recommendations, McGoughran hopes to convene a symposium in the next year on the topic, bringing together prosecutors, mental health professionals and the Judiciary to brainstorm how to put mental health diversionary programs in every courthouse.

“The NJSBA has the ability to focus issues for the court system and public,” McGoughran said. “It is vital that we continue to play that role for the betterment of New Jersey’s legal professionals and residents.” ■

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