

PRESIDENT'S PERSPECTIVE

CHRISTINE A. AMALFE

Answering the Call of Justice, Then and Now

Editor's note: Christine A. Amalfe was installed as the 127th president of the New Jersey State Bar Association at the Annual Meeting and Convention on May 15 in Atlantic City. This is an excerpt from her installation speech. It has been edited for brevity and clarity.



It is my honor and privilege to take the oath as the 127th President of the New Jersey State Bar Association. I am humbled and energized by the opportunity and stand ready to lead the Association forward at this unique moment for our country.

Given the challenges the legal profession and our justice system now face, I understand the trust that you have put in me. I understand the gravity of this position. I am here tonight to tell you that I am up to the task.

In the year ahead, I will use my voice to advocate for every lawyer in this state on the issues and developments that are important to our Association, the practice of law, our judicial system and the rule of law.

In truth, my roots in the NJSBA were planted long ago. I stand on the shoulders of my former partner and mentor, the late John Gibbons. In 1967, Judge Gibbons became president of the Association. This period was a difficult time for our country and especially for the city of Newark. In the summer of 1967, just after he was sworn in, an incident sparked a civil disturbance that led to six days of riots, looting, violence and destruction in Newark. The Newark Riots ultimately left 23 people dead, 725 people injured, and close to 1,500 arrested.

President Gibbons did not shy away from the challenge. He rallied attorneys from throughout the state to answer the call. He delivered cars full of lawyers to courthouses to assist in processing bail applications for those who were arrested. He enlisted lawyers throughout our state to represent those charged pro bono. He worked to ensure that the rule of law was upheld and that individual rights were protected, and justice was served consistent with our state and federal Constitutions.

I have reflected quite a bit on the parallels in our country and state now and then. I have thought about how Judge Gibbons must have felt back in 1967. He probably had an agenda that he

wanted to accomplish during his year as president. He probably identified issues that were important to the bar and to him that he wanted to focus on. But then a crisis presented itself and he pivoted to do what was needed in order to best serve the Association, the state and the country. In short, he understood the challenge and carried out the mission of this organization to promote access to the judicial system, fairness in its administration, and the independence and integrity of the judicial branch.

I understand the unique and unexpected challenges facing lawyers and law firms today. I understand the serious threats to our judges for simply doing their job. I understand the crisis that is once again brewing given the shortage of judges on our state courts.

I understand how political differences have often resulted in the inability of lawyers to listen to each other, to work together, to collaborate and to create solutions for the common good. I understand the need to restore civility to our discourse.

I vow to devote the energies of the NJSBA in the next year to rise to each and every challenge that presents itself.

Lawyers and bar associations could not be more important. We should be proud to be lawyers. We have a toolbox of skills to advocate for what is right, to engage in civil discourse and to fight for our Constitution and the rule of law. We are trained to engage with fairness and process and without partisanship. Lawyers can and will make a difference.

I hope to lead the way toward restoring the public's faith in our judicial system, making sure we have enough judges to dispense justice and serve the public, educating our citizens about democracy and the rule of law, and most importantly, protecting lawyers and law firms from unlawful retaliation simply for the clients they choose to represent.

I am proud of this Association's 126-year history of protecting the rule of law, democracy, and judicial independence. I am proud to affirm the NJSBA's commitment to fostering a diverse and inclusive legal community that works for every lawyer.

I pledge to do my best to listen to every argument and viewpoint, and to work together with all stakeholders to advocate for what is right and just and what is in the best interests of our association.

I look forward to serving the lawyers of this state for the next year. ■