

PRESIDENT'S PERSPECTIVE

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One Year, One Mission



Time seems to accelerate the longer you practice law. The days can be long, sometimes stressful and often rewarding, but the years tend to pass effortlessly. Every day brings another opportunity to land a client, win a

motion, stand before a jury and help give a client their day in court. Amid life's chaos, it's never a bad time to reflect on what you have achieved. If we don't look backward, we can never truly look forward.

Lawyers and bar associations play a vital role in society. We possess the skills to advocate for what is right, engage in civil discourse and defend our Constitution and the rule of law.

I spoke those words nearly a year ago when I accepted the honor and privilege of serving as the New Jersey State Bar Association's 127th president. Like many things in life, the year passed in a blink. As I reflect on my time as president, and my travels throughout this great state, nothing has shaken my conviction in the importance of the words I spoke almost a year ago. Civil discourse is alive and well in our state. Our members wake up every day and remember their oath to the Constitution and the rule of law. This bar association is serving the needs of the profession with education, thought leadership and resources.

From Salem to Sussex counties, I listened to the issues facing our profession and the challenges of our members. From Hudson to Hunterdon, I learned what solo and small firms face on a day-to-day basis. I listened to managing partners of the state's largest law firms and I engaged with many, many young lawyers to hear their unique perspectives. I spent time with sections and committees and took the bar association on the road to law firms and law schools. I learned a lot. But most importantly, the bar association learned too. Internally, we engaged in a full-year strategic planning initiative to reaffirm our commitment to members, focusing on the five strategic pillars which sustain our organization: advocacy, continuing

legal education, finance, membership and sections and committees. Our bar association is now better able to set priorities that truly matter to all of our members. In short, the NJSBA has never been better positioned to address those most pressing issues facing lawyers in this state and our profession in general.

Each day, I was inspired by the volunteers who dedicate their time outside of work to strengthen the profession. They devote countless hours drafting Supreme Court briefs, advocating in consequential cases, contributing to legislation that enhances our legal system and sharing their expertise through educational panels. They mentor the next generation of lawyers, hoping to leave the profession stronger than they found it. They represent the best of us, and I am proud to have stood alongside them. Leading this exceptional community has been one of the greatest honors of my professional life. We have much to celebrate.

We have made meaningful progress this year on a number of issues. First, our persistent advocacy in reducing statewide judicial vacancies, now at 11—the lowest level in several years—was a meaningful step toward restoring stability to New Jersey's courts and access to justice for our clients. Our Judicial and Prosecutorial Appointments Committee vetted several candidates last year, one of the busiest years for that hard-working committee in a very long time. In addition, I am pleased to report that in the spirit of collaboration with the governor's office, the Association renewed the Judicial Compact with Gov. Mikie Sherrill, continuing our longstanding, nonpartisan role in reviewing candidates for judgeships and county prosecutor positions. The compact ensures that prospective nominees undergo a comprehensive, inclusive vetting process drawing on diverse perspectives from across New Jersey's legal community. We are proud to have provided governors of both parties with informed, nonpartisan recommendations for nearly 60 years. This continued partnership will help sustain New Jersey's national reputation for judicial excellence, a standard the NJSBA is proud to uphold.

The NJSBA also remained committed to protecting the financial interests of attorneys, particularly as law firms face

Continued on page 26

16. *In re Kornbluh*, 134 N.J.L. 529, 530 (Sup. Ct. 1946).
17. *In re Miller's Petition*, 122 N.J.L. 176, 177 (Sup. Ct. 1939). The Appellate Division in *Eames* found the defect

was because the repealing statute "lacked 'certain constitutional requirements,'" however, the notice requirement for special legislation appeared in R.S. 1:6-6. *See Eames*,

- supra*, 481 N.J. Super. at 615 (quoting *McCabe, supra*, 81 N.J. at 468-69)(quoting *Miller's Pet.*, 122 N.J.L. at 177)).
18. N.J.S.A. 1:7-3.

PRESIDENT'S PERSPECTIVE

Continued from page 5

rising operational costs. After raising concerns about a proposed \$27 increase in the annual attorney registration fee, the Judiciary reconsidered, sparing attorneys an additional financial burden. Without this outcome, assessments would have risen nearly 40% in just over three years.

Throughout the year, the Association hosted meetings and retreats to gather perspectives from managing partners, county and affinity bar leaders and young lawyers. These discussions fostered dialogue across generations, uniting participants around the shared goal of strengthening the profession and improving service to clients. Internally, we are undertaking a strategic planning initiative to reaffirm our commitment to members, focusing on five pillars: advocacy, continuing legal education, finance, membership and sections and committees.

In a nation as strong as the United States, it is easy to take our Constitution and democratic principles for granted. To highlight the ongoing responsibility of citizens, the Association launched the Defending Democracy Series. This three-part educational program featured stellar panels of leaders in law, politics, academia

and journalism, exploring the history of the Constitution, attorneys' roles in defending free speech and strategies to uphold democratic values. The strong attendance among both legal professionals and the public was a heartening reminder that these principles remain deeply held and provide hope for the resilience of our democracy. And of course, the NJSBA will continue its outreach with programs like Law Day, co-sponsored by the New Jersey State Bar Foundation and local bar associations. This annual program, held around Law Day USA on May 1, opens the courts to the public, educates attendees about the judicial system and celebrates the rule of law in an accessible, engaging way.

Finally, we provided our members with many programs and meetings from Atlantic City to Sorrento, Italy, to Aruba where they could network, develop relationships, learn and have some fun. In a time of virtual meetings and isolation for many, these meetings provided our members with the opportunity to spend time with their colleagues within this incredible community of NJSBA members. As we continue to focus on attorney wellness, these in-person meetings could not be more important.

Unfortunately, this year has also been

a difficult one in many respects. The legal profession faced unprecedented attacks on the judiciary and law firms, including threats against judges for their rulings, campaigns targeting law firms for the clients they represent and retaliation against citizens for protected speech. As I write this column these threats continue.

The NJSBA is unwavering in its commitment to the rule of law, individual rights and a diverse, inclusive legal community. Attacks on judges, attorneys and law firms undermine public confidence in the independence of the judiciary, a cornerstone of our Constitution. They put our judges in danger, something no democratic society should allow. Together with the bar leaders who follow, I am committed to ensuring the Association continues to protect the rule of law, defend individual rights and preserve judicial independence. That is our mission, one we will uphold so long as we remain the voice of New Jersey attorneys, judges and legal professionals.

To the members of this Association: you are in the capable hands of passionate volunteers and dedicated staff, prepared to advance our mission and confront any challenge. I look forward to the future, and I thank you for the privilege of a lifetime. ■

SPECIAL EDITORS

Continued from page 7

precedent, and consider its implications for public confidence in the judiciary and the broader principles that underpin the rule of law.

Finally, the New Jersey State Bar Foundation article, *The Rule of Law as a Living Principle* addresses how the rule of law shapes everyday interactions, rights, and expectations in American society.

Taken together, these articles approach the rule of law from complementary per-

spectives—executive, judicial, legislative, historical, and philosophical, illustrating not only its foundational importance, but the ongoing responsibility required to sustain it in practice. ■