Bringing balance to the bar

By Dustin J. Seibert

Vincent Cornelius had quite the busy month of June.

There’s the matter of his son graduating from high school and preparing to ship him off to the University of Illinois in Champaign/Urbana. There’s also the recent commencement speech he delivered to his alma mater, the Northern Illinois University College of Law.

And, of course, there are the countless things he needed to accomplish in preparation for June 17, the day that marked the beginning of his tenure as president of the Illinois State Bar Association.

“Oh yeah, and I have a practice to run somewhere in there,” Cornelius says laughing, referring to his biggest professional responsibility: running the Joliet-based general practice firm The Law Offices of Vincent F. Cornelius.

Cornelius made history as the first black man to serve as ISBA president in its 139 years. For a man who has accomplished much in his professional career, the 52-year-old recognizes how the presidency puts him in the unique position to affect change in the state’s legal community, culturally and otherwise.

He talks to us from his Joliet office — where he can look out the window and see the school at which his beloved late mother, Lorrynne, taught for 34 years — about his plans for his one-year tenure as ISBA president.

Chicago Lawyer: Any big changes to Cornelius Law since we last spoke (in 2013)?

Cornelius: I made a couple significant changes. First, I moved my main office to Joliet at the end of 2014; my Wheaton office is now a satellite office. I made the change as a result of shifts in my business and the seemingly never-ending construction on (Illinois Route) 59 near I-88. This was an office space in Joliet that I always coveted, and I made the ultimate decision in anticipation that I would have a very busy year as president and would need (the closer office) to sustain my practice. It’s now a nice, easy drive for me to get to work. I also hired two new people — a veteran lawyer and another who is fresh out of law school studying for the bar exam and who happens to be my niece.
CL: Are you concerned about the balancing act of running a firm and being ISBA president?

Cornelius: I get asked that question frequently. Some people go so far as to say, ‘why in the world would you do that?’ I remind them that I believe that we’re all put on this earth for a purpose, and that the profession we choose ought to be one of the places where we make a difference in the world. It’s a challenge, no question. But I’ve always been a very busy, engaged person in general. I’m involved not just in the Illinois State Bar Association, but in other bar associations, my community, my church and my family. I’m often invited to be a keynote speaker at different events. It’s a sometimes hectic life.

That said, starting next year, a lot of the other places where I’ve committed time, energy and effort will probably suffer more than my law practice. Between the practice, my family and the bar association, there won’t be time for much else. The days get longer and a little more challenging, but it’s also extremely fulfilling. What we do by way of influencing legislation and various kinds of innovation will impact the Illinois State Bar Association for the better, the profession for the better and make our state a better place.

CL: As the ISBA’s first black president, do you feel a sense of social responsibility?

Cornelius: Absolutely. I’ve given it a lot of consideration and I plan to commit a great deal of time during my year (as president) to issues of diversity and inclusion within our association. I also will spend some time ensuring that our profession, our association and the community at large are educated on the issue of implicit bias. We all have implicit biases, and they have everything to do with how we’ve been hard-wired by our life experiences. People get offended at the suggestion that we have them, but we all do, and often times we have mindsets that we aren’t aware of.

CL: How will you approach the issue specifically?

Cornelius: We have some programming in the works, and I’m looking to bring in national experts on the issue. We’re looking to advance the issue in our publications, and I personally look forward to writing about it.

I also have to be mindful of the fact that my views as an African-American male in America will not always be representative of the membership of the ISBA. My position of responsibility as president will at times be distinct from what I consider to be my role as an African-American lawyer and leader.

As you might imagine, the legal profession is a microcosm of society, and when you look at the political landscape in our country today, a lot of smart, generally reasonably minded people have polar-opposite views on issues. These will be very interesting waters I have to navigate.

I will always be mindful of when I’m speaking for the ISBA and when I’m speaking for Vincent Cornelius. There will be times when one will have to give more deference to the other than I’d like, and I realize this going in.

CL: What are some other initiatives you’re planning for your tenure?

Cornelius: I am really focused on our new and younger lawyers for the sake of the future of our profession. The strategies that I hope to employ involve bringing together law students and law schools, deans and faculties to work together to embrace new lawyers and make them aware of benefits of membership to our association. I also want to provide them with the tools they need to adjust as seamlessly as possible into the profession.

The presidents who served as my predecessors did a great job of creating awareness for issues like law school student debt and law school curriculum preparation; it has helped create for me an opportunity to establish a council of law school deans within the ISBA to work in collaboration with stakeholders who are connected to law students and young lawyers entering the practice.

Once I get that council up and rolling, I hope to develop collaborations between it, the ISBA, the Illinois Supreme Court and our American Bar Association to make critical advancements that will be good for the practice and profession going forward. If we are to make any real progress in the future of our profession, you need all stakeholders at the table. You can’t unilaterally have one group making decisions that affect the other group.

CL: Why the concern for newer attorneys?

Cornelius: The tensions between younger and older lawyers are often generational — it’s an issue that exists in every other segment of society. My generation of lawyers (is) used to working so many hours, and we don’t give enough respect to work/life balance; younger lawyers insist on that balance.

When an older lawyer hires a younger lawyer and expects them to approach the practice like we do, it can create problems. But I’m of the opinion that newer and established lawyers have a great deal to offer one another, and the future of the profession hangs in properly developing those relationships.

CL: Any problems within the profession at large that you wish to address during your presidency?

Cornelius: There are a number of threats to the profession that are real and perceived. A real one at the forefront right now are these alternative business structures for law. There are groups and organizations that look to provide legal services by non-lawyers who employ lawyers and have a controlling interest in law practices.

We are of a strong mindset that this is tantamount to having people who are not doctors hiring doctors and making decisions for them. I won’t dignify them by calling out their names, but these businesses exist in a number of places in the country. The legal industry is a multibillion-dollar one, and non-lawyers want a piece of it.

CL: Do you worry about your ability to follow in the footsteps of previous presidents?

Cornelius: There’s no one thing I worry a lot about is because the presidents who came before me put wheels in motion that it’s wise for me to keep in motion. There has not been any unnecessary pride or authorship among ISBA presidents — just a group of fantastic leaders trying to advance the association, make our profession better and not worry about who gets the credit. I’ve witnessed a lot of past presidents who had a lot of respect for each other and whose hearts were in the right place. I hope to continue in that trend.

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