A historic step awaits Cornelius

In 3 years, Wheaton attorney will be first black ISBA president

BY MARC KARLINSKY
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SPRINGFIELD — A Wheaton attorney elected third vice president of the Illinois State Bar Association is on a course to become the group’s first black president in its 136-year history.

Vincent F. Cornelius, 49, said he’s looking forward to beginning his latest role with the largest bar group in the state.

“I’m just elated,” Cornelius said. “The Illinois State Bar Association is among the premier state bar associations in our nation.”

The owner of the Law Office of Vincent F. Cornelius will take the ISBA helm in June 2016, following a three-year path of succession to the group’s presidency — serving as third vice president this year, then second vice president and president-elect in following years.

ISBAs 32,000 members had until April 30 to submit ballots either online or by mail. Ninety-one percent of voters submitted theirs electronically, said David N. Anderson, ISBAs associate executive director.

Cornelius defeated Carl R. Draper — a partner at Feldman, Wasser, Draper & Cox in Springfield — by a count of 2,016 votes to 1,592.

While he’s honored to be part of an organizational milestone, Cornelius said diversity was never addressed as an issue during his candidacy. Rather, he said he focused on his preparation for the leadership role.

“The history of this accomplishment is not lost on me,” Cornelius said. “I know that there are young, aspiring African-American lawyers who will find this significant.”

Cornelius served his first term on the ISBA Board of Governors as an under-age-37 member in 1999. He was president of the Illinois Bar Foundation from 2008 to 2010 and returned to the board of governors after being appointed in 2011 as an at-large member.

Prior to starting his own firm that focuses on criminal and civil litigation, Cornelius was a DuPage County assistant state’s attorney and an associate at James D. Montgomery and Associates Ltd.

A 1989 graduate of the Northern Illinois University College of Law, Cornelius maintains a close relationship with his alma mater.

Jennifer L. Rosato, dean of NIU’s law school, described Cornelius as a “tremendous asset” to the school and community.

Since 2004, Cornelius has hosted a diversity reception each year, bringing together NIU alumni, faculty and law students, she said.

“He always has the time to mentor students, to work with me,” Rosato said. “He doesn’t just talk the talk of diversity, he walks the walk all the time.”

In 2010, the law school gave Cornelius its Outstanding Alumni Award.

With his experience mentoring and engaging with law students and young attorneys, Cornelius said he hopes he can make ISBA membership appealing to incoming generations of attorneys.

“I think we are in a battle for relevance with the ‘new lawyer,’” Cornelius said.

Some recent law graduates may not be as interested in joining bar groups as in the past, he said, and have less of a sense of duty to the legal community.

“They’re looking for a return on investment when they join an organization,” Cornelius said. “My goal will be to find those ways.”

In other election results:

•Winning four open board of governors seats assigned to Cook County were Albert E. Durkin, a partner at Miroballi, Durkin & Rudin LLC; Karen McNulty Enright, a partner at McNabola Law Group; Cook County Circuit Judge Celia G. Gamrath; and David B. Sosin, a partner at Sosin & Arnold Ltd. in Orland Park. They beat six other candidates for the spots.

•Bridget C. Duignan, an associate at Latherow Law Office, won an open board seat for Cook County lawyers under age 37, edging out her nearest opponent — Anna P. Krolikowska, a partner at K&R Family Legal Services LLP — in the four-way race by just three votes.

•Lake County Associate Judge Elizabeth M. Rochford won a board seat in Area 2, which is made up of the 17th, 19th and 22nd judicial circuits. She defeated sole practitioners Cheri N. Greenlee of Rockford and Mark W. Simons of Waukegan.