By Dustin J. Seibert

“I try not to paint with too broad a brush.”

This is the approach that Vincent Cornelius has taken toward race throughout his life and career. As a black man, the relationships he’s formed and connections he’s made have been dictated less by the color of his own skin and more on the character of others.

It’s likely this mindset that has allowed Cornelius, 49, to establish a noteworthy legal career, including his current path to eventually becoming the first black president in the nearly 140-year history of the Illinois State Bar Association.

Cornelius’ looks resemble those of a 20-something lawyer fresh out of law school. But in his 6-foot-4-inch exterior lies the mental attitude of not only a seasoned trial attorney, but that of a man who has balanced his cultural identity with an ability to form and maintain relationships with people from all walks of life.

One river, two sides

Cornelius was born in the Negro Ward of Jefferson County Hospital in Pine Bluff, Ark., two months before the enactment of the landmark Civil Rights Act of 1964 rendered the ward unconstitutional. His biological father, U.S. Brown Jr., died in an automobile accident when his mother Lorrayne was two months pregnant with Cornelius.

In 1966, Lorrayne answered a call for teachers who graduated from historically black colleges and universities to come to work in Joliet; Cornelius stayed behind for a few years with his grandmother in Arkansas before joining his mother.

He attended Washington Junior High School in Joliet, where Lorrayne taught physical education and science for 35 years.

He described Washington as a diverse school that still had a majority black population. It stood in contrast to his high school, Joliet Catholic Academy, which was academically strong but not nearly as diverse. Cornelius was the only black person in his 1982 graduating class.

Cornelius recalled that during the late 1960s and 1970s, Joliet was racially segregated. The Des Plaines River was the dividing line. Blacks and Hispanics were east of the river and whites were west; his two schools were on opposite sides of the river.

"On the east side, they probably saw me as the privileged kid who went to school on the other side of town, and on the west side, they probably saw me as the underprivileged student from the other side," he said. "I think on both sides of town, they knew the same guy."

The sum of those experiences, he said, allowed him to become "post-racial very early." It’s because of Joliet that "there is no racial or ethnic environment in which I’m uncomfortable."
“I’m careful about painting with too broad a brush and not putting everyone in the same category,” he said. “Everywhere you go, there will be some great people and there will be a few jerks. While I’ve had some problems with police officers who profile, I’ve also worked with some great peers, colleagues and superiors who were instrumental in helping me develop.

“By and large, (Joliet) was a great experience. It caused me to see the world differently in a lot of ways and I made so many good friends.”

Cornelius enjoyed basketball, playing for Joliet Catholic and eventually landing an athletic scholarship with the University of St. Francis. He ended up going to St. Francis and lived in dorms just a few blocks from his high school alma mater.

Despite his passion for hoops — one that would keep him playing in some capacity until a shattered knee at age 40 grounded him forever — he knew he wanted to become a lawyer from a very young age, thanks to two Raymonds: Raymond Burr, who portrayed the eponymous lawyer on the “Perry Mason” television show, and Raymond Bolden, a Joliet attorney whom Cornelius said was a “sharp, fearless, bold fighter for civil rights” as well as a family friend.

Two of a kind
Cornelius’ legal aspirations sent him to Northern Illinois University College of Law in DeKalb, which somewhat mirrored his experience at Joliet Catholic Academy — he was one of only two black students in his graduating class. He discovered in his first year that there was a significant dropout rate among black law students at the school.

“I wanted to change that trend,” he said.

To help accomplish that, less than a year after graduating from NIU, Cornelius gathered some attorney friends and drove to NIU to help black law students prepare for their midterm exams.

“I wanted to see a larger class of African-American NIU students than ever before succeed and make it out of there,” he said.

The connections he made in those study sessions — with then-aspiring lawyers who are now successful thanks to part to Cornelius — were indicative of his ethos that it is important to find the value in others before they’ve even fully discovered and cultivated their own value.

“At every level, people don’t see far enough down the line at what others can become,” he said. “I worked as a kid in McDonald’s with people who are very successful now. At that time, people just saw us all as McDonald’s kids.”

Chrystel Gavlin is an example of successful networking with Cornelius. The two met more than two decades ago when she was an undergraduate at St. Francis and he was studying for his bar exam.

He passed his information about law school to Gavlin when she told him she was interested in attending; their friendship started about five years later when she finally placed the call.

Cornelius put his network to work for Gavlin, who thanks him in large part for her rise to her current position as an associate judge in Will County.

“He was very instrumental in my career as a lawyer in general and instrumental in getting my first job as a prosecutor with DuPage County,” she said. “Setting aside his great legal ability, he’s just overall a very good person. He’s a class act; he’s a mentor.”

Five-year plan
Cornelius executed a five-year plan after graduating NIU to launch his own firm by age 30.

He was able to cherry pick his first job out of college, he said, thanks to a law school assistantship as an academic skills adviser for undergraduate students at NIU that helped pay for school and leave him virtually debt-free.

“I was concerned that if I went to a downtown law firm, I’d get buried as a young research lawyer and never make it to the courtroom,” he said. “Whereas if I went to a prosecutor’s office, I could get into the courtroom immediately and get a couple hundred trials under my belt.”

The first step in the plan, in what Cornelius said was “front page news” in 1989, was becoming the first black assistant state’s attorney in the history of DuPage County. After nearly four years of that, he joined James Montgomery & Associates with the intention of learning and practicing the civil side of law.

Montgomery, who was corporation counsel for the city of Chicago during Harold Washington’s time as mayor and a Chicago partner of famed attorney Johnnie Cochran, served as a profound influence on Cornelius.

“It was clearly a defining time in my career, to have access to that kind of a legal mind all day, every day,” he said. “In the (state’s attorney’s) office, I learned how to try a case, the art of persuasion and the value of selling the power of a story. With those two initial employments, I couldn’t have asked for better.”

Montgomery, a fellow ISBA member, still refers work to Cornelius on occasion.

“Without any equivocation, he’s one of the finest lawyers I know,” Montgomery said. “He’s an honest, competent and highly ethical person who relates well to judges as well as juries and colleagues. He’s a nonstop advocate
and servant of the bar and I have a great deal of admiration for him.”

After nearly two years with Montgomery, in March 1995, shortly before his 31st birthday, Cornelius fulfilled his five-year plan by opening the Law Office of Vincent P. Cornelius, focusing primarily on criminal defense and dabbling in plaintiff personal-injury work. As he does today, he typically operates his office with one associate attorney.

“I was (better prepared) than many lawyers who start their own firm five years out of law school,” he said.

Cornelius said his focus on criminal defense had less to do with a strong passion for that specific discipline and more to do with his love for being in a courtroom.

“I started my career as a prosecutor so (criminal defense) was a natural transition,” he said. “And it remains the kind of case I enjoy trying the most.”

While he acknowledges that he’s happy with the progress of his Wheaton-based firm after 18 years, he remains humble regarding what he has yet to do in contrast to those he admires.

“I’ve had so many conversations with other lawyers who think I have it pretty good, but I’ve been exposed to lawyers like Jim Montgomery and Johnnie Cochran and those I meet (through ISBA),” he said. “I’m around extraordinary lawyers with extraordinary accomplishments and I still see room for growth.”

Perceptions

Cornelius makes clear that while the color line blurred for him at a young age, he is not “racially removed” — meaning entirely obtuse to the perceptions of his ethnicity from others; he said he experienced some of the most profound firsthand racism of his career as a prosecutor in DuPage County. He said he was racially profiled by police officers — pulled over on several times as he drove to and from work but never actually issued a citation.

When he walks through the Will County Courthouse, he sees a lot of his childhood friends who wound up on the other side of the law. Many of them share his skin color.

“Every time I (speak with them), we have conversations like two friends,” he said. “The bailiffs don’t get upset when they see me sitting and talking with a man in an orange suit who is not my client, but is someone who I’ve known since I was 5 years old. I make it a point to do that.”

Cornelius believes that growing up with the disparate race and class experiences on both sides of the Des Plaines River made him far less judgmental than those who tend to have a more homogenous childhood. That mindset has motivated him to take on a small amount of pro bono work and serve as a mentor for those looking to rebound in their lives, personally and professionally.

“Some of my smartest, most gifted friends from growing up are six feet under,” he said. “I see my practice as part of my ministry. It’s where I find my opening and I see a whole lot of brothers looking for that opening, for that conversation … someone willing to help them through situations; to a new, different and better place in life. Some of them you can help, some of them you can’t.”

When he mentors people in the justice system, he encourages them to find something to excel at in spite of a prohibitive criminal history.

“When was the last time you asked your barber or plumber or the person who cuts your grass if they have a criminal background?” he said. “People underestimate the living that these people make. So I encourage them to find something to be really great at where nobody is going to ask them that question. It’s not easy … few of them are able to do it.”

Gavin said Cornelius’ ability to stay true to his racial and ethnic convictions while excelling in a diverse industry is key to his success.

“Vince is very proud of his ethnicity and culture and he doesn’t shy away from that,” she said. “You get to know him and you see there are all these wonderful qualities about him. You never hear about his race or ethnicity as a crutch and I think that other people who know him know that.”

Bar association ascendency

Cornelius, who has been active in the ISBA since the late 1990s, was elected as the organization’s third vice president in May; the path of succession will make him second vice president next year and president-elect in 2015 before he takes the helm of the 32,000-plus member group in June 2016.

He considers it a sign of progression that he was elected by ISBA members who live mostly downstate.

“It’s an honor because these people know me and know that African-American issues and developing African-American lawyers is very important to me,” he said. “I think I’m a servant at heart like my mom is and I fancy myself a problem-solver. I don’t know if I’m as much an innovator as a problem-solver, but some say that’s what makes an innovator.”

Each of the ISBA’s leadership members read a book called “Race for Relevance: 5 Radical Changes for Associations” by Harrison Coerver and Mary Byers.

The portion of the book that resonated with Cornelius involved the burgeoning American industry following World War II; he contrasts the era with that of the perspective of modern-day young people — specifically young attorneys — who are far less likely to join an organization like the ISBA.

“We’re at a point where this generation doesn’t wanna hear about how hard great-granddad had to work or how far he had to walk to get to school in heat or a blizzard,” he said. “They don’t join organizations out of duty or obligation anymore; they say, ‘What’s in it for me?’”

“Without any equivocation, he’s one of the finest lawyers I know. He’s an honest, competent and highly ethical person who relates well to judges as well as juries and colleagues.”
This challenge to keep the ISBA relevant and help young attorneys see the value of membership is at the forefront of his work as he prepares to take the big seat in a few years.

“I’m the person for this juncture of our association who has been preparing to bring all these things together,” he said. “To help the ISBA to see our needs and embrace what will sustain us in generations to come and help this new generation of lawyers understand who we are as an association; how important our tradition is. And what better example is there than of me not being appointed, but elected?”

Cornelius’ vision of his presidency in 2016 is simple: To have his slate as clean as possible — more specifically, to be able to “pick the issue instead of the issue picking you,” he said.

“When you are third vice president, if you’re smart, you’ll be working really, really hard to help the second and first vice president and current president to resolve every problem that might be your problem when you get there,” he said. “So my platform has already begun.

“I would like to break my own personal mold of being a problem-solver. I don’t want to solve problems when I’m president ... I want to be able to look around and see what, innovatively and creatively, can really be done.”

Cornelius said he’s also excited to become part of what he calls a “change in motion” toward the technological advancement that’s part of the evolving courtroom.

He said he still encounters courtrooms in which judges scold lawyers for checking practice-related information on their smartphones.

“There are certain entities that don’t really change with the rest of the world and are bringing up the rear,” he said. “Some still want to walk around with big paper files. The world is more global, and we have to become more advanced in the way we practice, and the way the court system allows us to practice.”

Looking back, giving back

At the behest of LeRoy Pernell — NIU College of Law’s first black dean — Cornelius founded the African-American Alumni Reception in 2003 as a means to re-engage black attorneys who would have otherwise fallen by the wayside.

“When we leave without coming back, we’re severing a network and depriving future alums,” Cornelius said.

By tapping into his connections and learning who to contact to stoke the greatest turnout, Cornelius made that inaugural reception the school’s largest alumni gathering to date, which happened to also be with the smallest demographic of NIU students.

The annual reception is now called the NIU College of Law Diversity Reception and invites all historically underrepresented minorities. Jennifer Rosato, the law school’s current dean, runs it with Cornelius.

“It’s really his thing ... it embodies what he is about and what the law school is about,” Rosato said. “It’s just a great success because he’s an inspiration and so persuasive to the community. There’s no other person I can think of who can do that and he’s made it bigger and better every year.”

Just as Cornelius is invested in keeping alumni engaged, he’s also passionate about getting young attorneys engaged in the future of practicing law, which plays into his desire for increased relevance.

“I would like to get young lawyers to understand that they are critical to the paradigm shift of this profession,” he said. “We need their young mindset, their innovation, their energy. Maybe even to some extent, their way of life. Maybe we (older attorneys have) been grinding too crazy and hard. ... There’s a lot we can learn from one another.”

He also wishes to teach them a talent he seems to have mastered — relationship and network building. He said that he learns something in every aspect of his life that he can apply to others.

“There’s great value in relationships young lawyers will form,” he said. “It’s amazing to me that what I can learn in a little church meeting helps me in the ISBA or how what I pick up on in an ISBA investment meeting helps me with a client.”

“If young lawyers are looking for a return on investment, it’s there. Maybe not this year, maybe not next year, but it’s there. Our profession is constantly changing, the law is constantly changing and the worst thing a lawyer can do is remain isolated because we depend on each other a lot.”

It’s that dedication to change, to growth, to improvement, that Rosato believes makes Cornelius the appropriate mentor for generations of aspiring lawyers.

“He has this humility about him that allows people to access him in ways that wouldn’t be the same if he had an arrogance about him,” Rosato said. “He’s very appreciative and grateful and he’s humble about his own achievements, which are many.”

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