



Illinois Bar Journal

July 2016 • Volume 104 • Number 7 • Page 22

The Magazine of Illinois Lawyers

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ISBA

Stepping to Center Court

By Ed Finkel

Joliet and Wheaton trial lawyer Vincent F. Cornelius, a former college basketball player and the first African American to lead the bar, will focus his year on young and newly admitted lawyers, diversity and inclusion, and high-quality CLE for solo and small firm lawyers.

Looking out the windows of his 7th floor corner office in downtown Joliet, incoming ISBA President Vincent F. Cornelius is surrounded by his roots.

Cornelius can stand in one spot and point to Washington Junior High School, which he attended and where his mother taught for 34 years; out another window is the former location of Joliet Catholic High School, where he graduated in 1982 and which has since merged with sister school Saint Francis Academy; and at a slightly different angle is the University of Saint Francis, where he graduated in 1986 as an Academic All-American basketball player.

Cornelius - whose agenda as ISBA president includes working to brighten the future of young lawyers, advocating for diversity and inclusion in the profession, and offering relevant continuing legal education for small-firm members - says he once set foot in his office when it housed another firm and had his eyes on it for awhile.

"I wanted this suite because the space and all of [the surroundings] meant so much to me," he says. "I can kind of walk all around my suite here and see all over town - the neighborhoods that I lived in, the memories that I had."

Cornelius, the first African American to serve as ISBA president, has memories of wanting to be an attorney since he was in elementary school, citing "both substantive and shallow" reasons for being drawn to the profession. The substantive piece traces to his mother, who had a master's degree in human development and "loved helping people," he says. "I loved that about my mom. And that was something that was important to me. I saw my mom help people a lot when they were at their lowest points."

And the "shallow" reason? "I was a big fan of a show called *Perry Mason*," he says with a laugh. "And somewhere, between those two things, I decided way too early in life that I wanted to be a lawyer.... I don't know if I ever considered



anything else seriously enough. I don't say that from a place of regret, but I just never really thought of doing anything else." In fact, he adds, "I'm probably doing the only thing that I never would have regretted doing."

Career beginnings in DuPage

Cornelius did not immediately return to his roots after graduating from the Northern Illinois University College of Law, where he returned this spring as commencement speaker. He began his career as an assistant state's attorney in DuPage County, after working in the Will County State's Attorney's Office during law school.

"I knew that I wanted to be a prosecutor or a public defender to start my career because I wanted to get a lot of trial experience," says the tall, nattily dressed Cornelius, whose ensemble includes a signature bowtie. "And then I wanted to transition to a civil litigation law firm with my trial experience because then I could go in and try cases, and I wouldn't be relegated to being a research lawyer and a brief writer."

Trying criminal cases in the city and county where he grew up presented potential career - and personal - conflicts of interest, Cornelius explains. "Having grown up in Joliet, living here all of my life, my mother being a very well-known educator in town and a politically engaged person, and me having been a high school and college athlete here - I knew everyone, and everyone knew me," he says with a chuckle. "It's hard to prosecute and ask for jail time and prison time where you know everyone and everyone knows you."

After three years in DuPage, Cornelius then spent two years working for James D. Montgomery & Associates in Chicago to gain civil trial experience, and he set a goal of opening his own firm by age 30. Two months before his 31st birthday, he opened the Law Office of Vincent F. Cornelius in Wheaton - and about a decade later he opened a second office in Joliet, where he now spends most of his time, with a single associate and a law student, who at the moment happens to be his niece, helping him out.

"When I ran for third vice president [of the ISBA], my main office was still in Wheaton," he says. "This suite that I've always dreamed of having came available two years ago, and I have moved here. And it still looks peculiar to people that my ISBA badge now says, 'Vincent F. Cornelius, Joliet,' instead of 'Vincent F. Cornelius, Wheaton.' "

A guard and forward in his basketball days, Cornelius believes litigation stood out for him due to the competitive similarities with high school and intercollegiate athletics. "That competitive thing that drove me as an athlete I think very much drives me as a lawyer," he says. "All the attributes and characteristics that it takes to be a very good athlete are also true of what it takes to be a very good trial lawyer. And my friends often chuckle about and speak of a correlation between the basketball court and the courtroom, and my move from one to the other."

Lifelong leader



Cornelius began his ascent to ISBA leadership in 1999 when Wheaton attorney Irene Bahr, who served as ISBA president a decade ago from 2006-07, encouraged him to run for a 37-and-under seat on the Board of Governors.

"I've been in leadership, I guess, all of my life," he says. "I was always captain of my sports teams and a leader in my church, and among my peer groups, my college student government. My first experience in leadership with the ISBA was with the Board of Governors, and I was hooked."

Serving on the board provided the opportunity to begin to have a positive effect on ISBA members and the field of law more broadly, Cornelius says. "That's what it was for me, how we could impact our profession, and all of the people in the world who rely on our profession?" he says. "And influencing legislation, influencing the court system, and really, influencing one another to be better."

In the years since, Cornelius has served as assistant treasurer and chaired several committees of the DuPage County Bar Association, and he became a founding member of The Black Bar Association of Will County when it was launched in 2005. He is also a member of the African American-oriented Cook County Bar Association, although he has not been active because his work does not take him to Cook County.

Prior to entering the ISBA leadership track, Cornelius served as regent and then chancellor of the ISBA's Academy of Illinois Lawyers, and also on the board and then later as president of the Illinois Bar Foundation from 2008-10. "So I've been busy," he says with a laugh. "You learn in these roles that from the Wisconsin border to Cairo, Illinois is a very long state."

Future of the profession

A key focus of Cornelius' year as president will be the future of the profession, examining both how law schools are preparing young lawyers and what role established lawyers and law firms should play at the outset of their careers. "You also have to talk about how it is that we as lawyers who are established receive them into the profession, and mentor them and train them, and prepare them for the practice of law, as well as how we serve the public as a profession," he says.

Part of that conversation revolves around dollars and cents, Cornelius says. "It's difficult for young lawyers out here now. Their debt is extraordinary," he says. "The costs of a law school education is becoming increasingly beyond reach. And then when they arrive in the profession, saddled by debt, they find the jobs are not as abundant as they used to be, that the salaries that are available to them are not what they had hoped.... It can be disheartening."

Bar leaders and veteran attorneys need to appreciate what the younger generation of lawyers bring to the table, both technologically and culturally, Cornelius says. "They bring a technological mindset that's just unbelievable. I mean, they were born with devices in their hands," he says. "And they have a better appreciation for work-life balance than my generation and the ones before us do. That appreciation for work-life balance...is actually the source of a little tension between them and the generation of lawyers that would hire them."

Cornelius hopes to advance older attorneys' appreciation for the younger generation and its perspectives and priorities while giving younger attorneys the chance to learn from and be molded by their elders. "I really want us to find that common ground that makes our association better and that makes our profession better," he says. "The pace of the world is so different. I actually find it peculiar that we can do everything 10 times faster than we used to be able to do it,...but we don't seem to have any more time in the day. Young lawyers, on the other hand, do seem to appreciate time away from the practice."

His own appreciation for younger lawyers' perspectives stems in part from entering bar leadership at age 37 and then becoming president of the Illinois Bar Foundation in his mid-40s. "For all of those years, I was the young lawyer in the room," he says. "I think I'm learning a lot from younger lawyers, and I want the profession to learn from younger lawyers."

To reach out to new attorneys, Cornelius and his predecessor, Umberto Davi, have been starting with the deans of Illinois' law schools. He hopes to participate in as many law school orientations as he possibly can this fall. The purpose: "To tell [students] about our association, to talk about our profession, to let them know that the profession is already concerned about their matriculation, and their progression, and their movement toward the practice of law."

Cornelius also would like to establish a council of law school deans to engage in dialogue with ISBA leadership as well as the Illinois Supreme Court "to collectively address issues of law schools and young lawyers and our profession going forward," he says. "I don't know if that has been done in any other part of the country. I'm not aware of it, particularly as a council within a state bar association."

Diversity and inclusion

As the first African-American president of the ISBA, Cornelius says he feels an obligation to address issues related to diversity and inclusion within both the bar association and the profession as a whole, including the court system.

"I obviously have a unique perspective [among ISBA presidents] on diversity and inclusion and issues of implicit bias. I will look forward to addressing those issues," he says, adding firmly, "All of us - all of us - have implicit biases, and sometimes that is more hard-wiring than a callous heart. But if we're not aware of our implicit bias, it sure appears like a callous heart."

Cornelius stresses that he has his eye on the larger picture of the profession. "I will be the first African American installed. I've said frequently that the history of that is in no way lost on me," he says. "I appreciate the significance of it. I understand it. But I also understand that in June of 2017, a new president will be installed and my year will be over with, and the only thing that will really matter is whether I was an effective ISBA president."

"I want the consensus to be that I was," he adds. "That said, that's why the diversity issues are important to me."

Cornelius' exact initiatives related to diversity, inclusion, and implicit bias are yet to be firmed up. "I don't want to say yet," he says with a laugh. "There are a couple places I need some commitments."

CLE: Focus on solos and smalls

As a small-firm attorney since leaving the state's attorney's office, Cornelius understands the concerns of his peers, including solo practitioners, and he plans to address their issues as well. The ISBA annual meeting, which will be held for the first time in recent memory in the state of Illinois (in Rosemont), will incorporate the association's Solo and Small Firm Practice Institute.

"That is something that's usually done stand-alone, and independent of the annual meeting," he says. "But this is the time when most of us are together, and the greatest opportunities present themselves for us to take continuing legal education and to talk about the issues that help us grow our practice, and ensure that we're on top of the law and its changes, and the changes in technology that relate to our profession."

Cornelius says the specific CLE programs for his year are works in progress but expects some could tie in to his other themes of new and young lawyers, diversity and inclusion, and general competence and professionalism in the legal field.

Related to the latter will be one of the "tails that are going to wag me," as Cornelius puts it, regarding the issue of non-lawyers participating in the legal profession. "[UPL] is the obvious elephant in the room that I will have to pay very close attention to, and so will every president coming after me, because there is an aggressive movement from nonlawyers to participate in this multi-billion dollar profession," he says, adding wryly, "Everybody is a mechanic until you get under the hood."

But Cornelius sees such challenges as part of the territory, and he eagerly looks forward to taking the helm nonetheless. "There will always be issues that are unanticipated that present themselves at the most inopportune time for every president, and I don't expect it to be any different for me," he says. "I am really, really excited about the opportunity to lead what I believe is the premier state bar association in our nation. To be an emissary and a representative of Illinois lawyers is something really, really special, and I consider that a great blessing."

Rave reviews

Those who have known Cornelius at varying points along his journey through the profession and bar leadership expect he will make the most of the opportunity as president and bring numerous qualities to the table that will benefit the bar and its membership.

Retired Judge Edward Masters, who served as Will County State's Attorney when Cornelius worked in that office during law school, remembers meeting him for the first time. "Vince gave a very good presentation of himself, he had a good head on his shoulders, he seemed interested in what we were doing, and he wanted to get involved," Masters says. "He was very diligent in the things he was assigned. He was very thorough."

Once Cornelius became a practicing attorney, Masters heard positive reviews from fellow judges before whom Cornelius practiced. "He gives a good account of himself when he's in court," Masters says. "He's very thorough and very knowledgeable.... He's just got good habits, and he's kept those good habits into his practice."

James E. Ryan, DuPage County State's Attorney when Cornelius worked in that office, provides a similar account. "He was a very enthusiastic young man," Ryan says. "He wanted to dig into the law, and he did very well. He was diligent.... Vince struck me as a very ambitious young man - not in any negative way - but he wanted to get better in his craft and move ahead, and he did a good job." In addition to diversity, Cornelius will bring his intelligence and love of the law to bar leadership, he says.

Herb Franks, who served as ISBA president in 2000-01 and is a partner with Franks Gerkin McKenna in Marengo, saw many of those same qualities when he first met Cornelius. "He was a witty, smart, and engaging young man, and to top it all off he was a good lawyer," Franks says. "I told him he had the makings of a true bar leader, and I urged him to get involved....He understands the necessity of making a living for a lawyer, he understands how difficult it is, and he will work to teach others."

Franks believes Cornelius will be a fresh face and bring new enthusiasm to ISBA leadership. "He's a very friendly person, and it's not phony," he says. "I really like him as a human being. People, as they get to know him, will feel the same way. He's a leader."

Irene Bahr, who was on the Board of Governors herself when she encouraged Cornelius to run for the 37-and-under seat, knew he was highly thought of, intelligent, and "very nice," she says. "I saw him as someone who could work into the leadership. I wanted to see him move through the ranks.... I thought he would be a hard worker and not just do it for the title and the glory."

Cornelius will be a thoughtful, deliberative leader, Bahr predicts. "He doesn't shoot from the hip. He studies issues," she says. "He's still a small practitioner, which is where the [preponderance of] ISBA membership lies. He has a deep understanding of what it means to run your own practice and what kinds of support services the bar association can give you, which is important for somebody in that leadership position."

Cornelius and his wife, Zina, an insurance company data analyst, celebrate their 25th wedding anniversary this fall. His daughter studies public affairs at Ohio State, and his son will be a freshman this fall in bioengineering at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. "While I have a host of young relatives who have expressed an interest in being lawyers, neither of my kids have," he says.

He also enjoys sports, music, "and a good game of pool when time permits."

Tongue in cheek, Bahr points out one other passion Cornelius will bring to the role of bar president. "Everybody always kids him about being a dapper dresser," she says. "We'll look to him for fashion advice."



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