



Service to the Bar: You Get More than You Give

By serving in organizations like the ISBA, we renew the idealism and sense of purpose that drew us to the profession in the first place.

When we first became lawyers – when we raised our right hands and promised to preserve and protect the constitution – we were reminded that the practice of law is a public trust, and we had a vivid sense of the nobility of this ancient and honorable profession.

But then – day after day and year after year – distractions occurred and that noble vision began to dim. We became preoccupied with the day-to-day routines of our practice: the insatiable demand for billable hours; the minutiae of routine, sometimes tedious legal tasks, repeated day after day, year after year.

And yet, once in a while, we are given a chance to strike a blow for freedom. Once in a while, we are given a chance to improve the administration of justice. Once in a while, we are given a chance to change the law under which 12 million people live and work.

And more often than not, those opportunities come not in the day-to-day practice of law, but rather through the work of the organized bar – precisely the sort of activities we celebrate today.

Thomas S. Johnson, Rockford
Laureate of the Academy of Illinois
Lawyers and ISBA member

I am writing this shortly after my return from the ISBA annual meeting in Lake Geneva. I am never more impressed with our bar association than during and following the annual meeting. The absolute best of our legal profession is on display.

On this occasion, I was of course humbled by the attention I received as your new president. I hope that I am able to live up to the trust placed

in me and in some small way have a positive impact on the association, the profession, and the system of justice during my term.

As I said several times over the annual meeting weekend, I do not recall a time when the Illinois State Bar Association has had a better working relationship with the Illinois Supreme Court. As usual, the Illinois Supreme Court justices in attendance at the annual meeting (including the chief justice, who administered the oath of office to me) were in attendance and contributed significantly to the various events.

We are particularly grateful for their interest and contributions to the affairs of the ISBA. The court's openness has greatly strengthened our partnership for the betterment of the profession and the system of justice in Illinois, and the people of this state are the real beneficiaries.

As an added bonus, the justices seem to truly enjoy the company of the lawyers and judges at the annual meeting and other bar events. We are thankful not only for their involvement but for their good company as well.

More than 60 ISBA section councils and committees met during the course of the annual meeting. Several sponsored valuable CLE programs.

The members of these section councils and committees are the working soldiers – the lifeblood – of the ISBA. It is their volunteer work that enables the ISBA to function effectively. Their voice on issues within their areas of expertise is critical to helping the ISBA make well-informed decisions, speak out thoughtfully and intelligently, and improve the life of Illinois lawyers and the system of justice.

My own extensive involvement in section and committee work has been rewarding both professionally and personally. In addition to being enriched by the exposure to cutting-edge issues and becoming a much better informed lawyer, I made some of the most valuable friendships of my life. I strongly

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encourage those of you who have not been involved in section council and committee work for the ISBA to consider nominating yourself for service next year (watch ISBA publications for nomination forms this fall). You will receive much more than you give.

I also presided over my first Assembly meeting at the annual meeting. The Assembly is the ISBA's "people's house," elected directly by the membership in each judicial circuit, and the membership's direct voice in the governance of the ISBA. Back in 1997, one of the recommendations of the Task Force on Governance, which I chaired, was to increase the involvement of the Assembly in ISBA affairs, and to make sure important issues were addressed and decided by that body rather than solely by the Board of Governors, consistent with the spirit of the ISBA's bylaws.

This year the Assembly was asked to consider, among other important issues, proposed legislation introduced

and pending in the state legislature seeking to establish the right of domestic partners, whether same or opposite sex, to apply for a “civil union” according to their rights and responsibilities they would otherwise not have. The bill addresses the perceived need for clearer and more certain rules, rights, and obligations for committed domestic partners in nonmarital relationships.

I was impressed with the level and tenor of the debate on this issue. The bill raises sensitive issues and touches upon strongly held beliefs on both sides. I was proud to see the issues discussed calmly and with respect for those with opposing views – the high-level discourse one would expect from the best and the brightest of the Illinois legal community.

The first issue addressed, as dictated by the Assembly agenda, was whether to take a position at all on the bill. After lengthy debate and by a large majority, the Assembly decided that, as the leading organization of Illinois lawyers, the ISBA needed to take

a position – whatever it might be – to provide guidance to the legislature on whether such a law was necessary.

Ultimately, the Assembly, also by a large majority, supported the measure in concept. Most Assembly members concluded that the law would help more clearly define the rights and obligations of an increasing number of Illinois residents in nontraditional domestic partnerships, as well as the children and others who are affected by the lack of clarity regarding such relationships.

Without regard to the merits of the position adopted, the orderly process by which the Assembly came to a position was a testament to how decisions should be made in a democratic society and in our own bar association. I sincerely encourage those of you who might have preferred a different outcome to run for ISBA office and join the debate. You will be enriched by the process.

In addition to all of this, there was the usual good will and friendship among those at the annual meeting.

Most members are able to combine professional activities with a healthy dose of fun and relaxation with their families.

In discussing the rewards of bar association activities, I am reminded of the eloquent speech by prominent ISBA member Tom Johnson of Rockford a few years ago when he was inducted as a Laureate of the Academy of Illinois Lawyers. With his permission, I quoted him above.

There are many benefits of bar association involvement, but one of the greatest is that we can rekindle the passion we had the day we first decided to pursue the law as a career and speak out on issues of importance to the greater community. Serving in the organized bar makes it easier for us to awake every morning and face another day, particularly during those inevitable periods when the day-to-day practice of law, with all its stresses and difficulties, might have us question our choice. ■

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