

Michael Miller: An active leader for 'noble' profession



President-elect—Michael Miller, who will become president-elect of the State Bar on June 1, speaks to House of Delegates during its April 1, 2017 meeting in Albany. [Photo by Marty Kerins, Jr.]

By Christian Nolan

When incoming President-elect Michael Miller talks about pro bono work and the nobility of the legal profession, it is more than just words. Miller has backed that up with decades of action.

For instance, in 1996 he spent a month in war-torn Bosnia serving as an election supervisor. Three years later, he interviewed Kosovar refugees for evidence of

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war crimes and crimes against humanity for the U.S. Department of Justice in an initiative with the American Bar Association.

In the weeks after the Sept. 11, 2001 terrorist attacks, Miller worked seven days a week for six weeks leading lawyer volunteer efforts to help families of victims, among other things, obtain death certificates. Miller and other volunteer lawyers met with surviving family members, listened to their heart-wrenching tales, reviewed the applica-

tions and helped correct any mistakes before they were processed and mailed.

Miller has received many awards over the years for his volunteer efforts, most notably the ABA's Pro Bono Publico Award in 2002—its highest award for pro bono service—for his efforts following the 9/11 attacks.

"I don't often talk about that work," said Miller, referring to 9/11. "But I think it's impor-

tant to remember that adversity brings out the best in our profession."

Miller, however, doesn't step up only in times of tragedy. He has routinely donated his time and recognizes those in his profession who do the same.

"I recognize that we are imperfect creatures," said Miller. "But the reason this has been called a noble profession is because there is no profession anywhere on earth that gives more back to the community in more ways than the American legal profes-

sion. So I'm very proud to be an American lawyer. I hope that, during my time as a leader of this great and noble association, I can convey to our members and the profession at large that we are truly part of something very, very special."

Inspiration from the 'front lines'

Miller, of Manhattan, said that he "came of age" during the 1960s and was inspired by lawyers who fought on the front lines of the Civil Rights Movement. He was attracted to problem-solving and believed lawyers were problem-solvers, so he decided to attend law school.

Immediately upon graduating from New York Law School in 1984, he began a solo practice, organizing and representing tenants and tenant groups in New York City as he developed a trusts and estates practice.

Today he is involved in all aspects of trust estate planning, administration and litigation. He finds the work "intellectually stimulating and rewarding on several levels."

Sometimes it involves helping people at a time of need, especially in

dealing with grieving families. Other times it may involve complex tax considerations in estate planning, or conflicts of laws when multiple jurisdictions are involved, families in dispute, or issues related to aging.

On the wealth management side, he assists in marshalling and managing various assets, from a 500-room hotel to a 1 million-square-foot prime commercial building to a 300-apartment residential building in Manhattan, as well as disposing of collections of fine art jewelry and other assets.

Helpful advice

From the start of his legal career, Miller had the help of his mentor, a New York City tenant attorney named Leonard Lerner, with whom he shared office space. Having lost his father at an early age, Miller said Lerner, who died in 1993, was a father figure to him.

Miller described Lerner as a "passionate and skilled advocate who was the attorney of last resort when other lawyers had turned clients away because they had little or no money and little or no hope of prevailing."

"He saved people, saved families," recalled Miller. "The thing that struck me most about Len was that he didn't view law as a path to power and wealth, but as a means to empower the powerless. He had a tremendous impact on my life and my perspective."

Miller credits Lerner with advice that still benefits him and had a profound impact on his career. He recalled the night of his law school graduation, when, celebrating with Lerner, his mentor gave him a critical tip.

"The first thing you do is join the New York County Lawyers and New York State Bar associations," Miller said Lerner told him.

Miller went on to join and chair numerous committees and sections within each bar association as well as be elected to the executive committee of both. He has previously served as president of the New York County Lawyers Association and will become president-elect of the State Bar on June 1.

Miller said he credits his solo trusts and estates practice for giving him the "freedom to devote meaningful time to the work that I find personally enriching and what I consider my public service work—the bar."

Miller also credits his wife Cindy, a former Radio City Music Hall Rockette, for her support, encouragement and understanding. The couple has two children, Danielle, 27, who attends law school in California, and Max, 25, an actor and musician who graduated from Syracuse University.

'Awe and pride'

On June 17, Miller will preside over the House of Delegates, which also marks the

25th anniversary of his first House meeting.

"I remember my first House of Delegates meeting. I was in awe," said Miller. "What the heck am I doing amongst these luminaries? The level of debate and oratory was so exceptional; the matters before the House were meaningful, important. Eventually I got past the awe and pride set in."

Miller said the State Bar has provided opportunities unavailable in any other way.

"Here at the State Bar, you have an opportunity to do good work for the betterment of our community, fellow citizens and profession and get to know people from all over the state whom you wouldn't otherwise ever have contact with," said Miller.

"I've developed friendships with wonderful people in Buffalo, Albany, Binghamton, Staten Island, Rochester, Nassau, Suffolk and elsewhere whom it is unlikely I ever would have met—people who are examples of the best qualities in our profession—scholarship, humanity and a commitment to try to make the world a little bit better."

Miller said the voice of the State Bar's membership is strong.

"This Association is the voice of our profession like no other," said Miller.

"Local bars and affinity bars are important and have a meaningful role, but when there are unfair regulations proposed, inappropriate laws, violations of civil liberties, discriminatory practices, there is no stronger, more effective, more persuasive voice than that of the New York State Bar Association." ♦

Christian Nolan is NYSBA's senior writer.