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## *Miller Takes President's Seat at County Lawyers'* Lifelong Manhattanite Known for Pro Bono

**BY JOHN WOODS**

THE NEW YORK County Lawyers' Association is set to induct its new president tonight, as Manhattan solo practitioner Michael Miller is scheduled to take the reins from outgoing president Craig A. Landy at the organization's annual meeting.

Mr. Miller, whose general civil practice specializes in estate, trusts, elder law, receiverships and real estate, will become the first solo practitioner to head NYCLA since Henry A. Gildersleeve, who signed the association's

articles of incorporation in 1908, stepped down from his role as president in 1917.

A native of Manhattan who lives in the same midtown apartment where he grew up, Mr. Miller, 50, has distinguished himself throughout his 18-year career with pro bono activities involving everything from assisting elections in Bosnia to aiding refugees from Kosovo. In August he will receive the American Bar Association's Pro Bono Publico Award for leading the effort to secure death certificates for families of the victims of the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks.

"Michael was a true leader in mobilizing the New York County Lawyers' Association's response to that tragedy," said Mr. Landy. "The countless hours he spent down at the family assistance

center really stand out."

Mr. Miller credits his mother for inspiring him to take on public interest work. Juliet Miller raised her son, and his younger sister Marie, while running a family-owned coffee shop on 54th Street and Seventh Avenue after Mr. Miller's father died in 1964. His mother, said Mr. Miller, instilled in him the ideal that with privilege comes responsibility to help the less advantaged. In 1971, Mr. Miller left his undergraduate studies at New York University after two years to help his mother with the business.

"I was brought up in the coffee shop business," said Mr. Miller, who lists dishwasher, busboy, soda jerk and cashier among the jobs he had by the time he was 11 years old. During his time away from his studies, Mr. Miller would work seven days a week, often up to 20 hours per day.

Once the coffee shop was converted into a card and gift shop 13 months after Mr. Miller left college, his help was less needed. He took a job in the insurance industry with the father of a friend before returning to NYU to major in metropolitan studies in 1980. Graduating from NYU in 1981, Mr. Miller went on to New York Law School, where he earned his law degree in 1984.

Mr. Miller was introduced to NYCLA shortly after graduation by one of his

mentors, the late Leonard Lerner, a solo practitioner with whom Mr. Miller interned while at law school and who gave him his first job as a lawyer.

"He was a great role model," said Mr. Miller of Mr. Lerner. "He was 'Mr. Pro Bono' long before we had the kind of emphasis on pro bono work we have in the profession now."

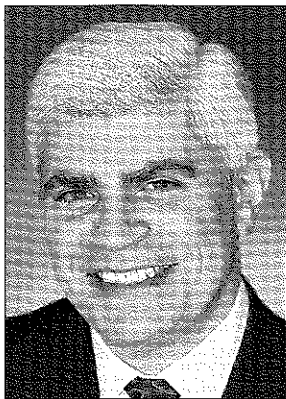
### **Court Conditions**

Having been a member or the chair of more than 20 NYCLA committees since he joined in 1984, Mr. Miller includes among his most important committee work during that time a 1991 Civil Court Committee report concerning the backlog of cases resulting from a budget crisis, and a 1993 Special Committee on State Court Facilities report on the 10 worst conditions in state courts at the time.

"That report got an enormous amount of media attention," said Mr. Miller. "We [reported] about the conditions jurors were forced to endure and the fact that you had judges in the Housing Court doubling or tripling up in chambers, which made it almost impossible to write or have private meetings."

Justice Stephen G. Crane, of the Appellate Division, Second Department, who was also on the committee at the time, gives Mr. Miller credit for bringing the issue of the court conditions to light.

"He did a marvelous job publicizing the report," said Justice Crane. "It was the



**Michael Miller**

subject of a couple of television news programs and it focused attention on, at that time, a very neglected situation in the courts."

Mr. Miller agreed that the media attention contributed to improving the situation.

"You never know how much impact your report has, but those conditions improved quickly because there were a lot of folks that were embarrassed," Mr. Miller said.

### Free Elections

In 1996, Mr. Miller was one of eight applicants selected by the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe to help supervise the first free elections in Bosnia following that country's civil war. Mr. Miller spent a month in Bosnia co-leading a team that monitored polling places and the procedures used to complete the election.

"We were able, with Michael's leadership, to set up a system where the ballots were counted,"

said fellow Bosnia volunteer Frederic J. Cowan, the former attorney general of Kentucky who is now of counsel at Louisville's Lynch, Cox, Gilman & Mahan. "Without that [system] there's no telling what would have happened. Maybe violence or some other incident ... would have undermined the integrity of the election process."

Mr. Miller, who has two children, daughter Danielle, 12, and son Max, 10, with his wife Cynthia, a former Rockette at Radio City Music Hall, was most affected by the toll the war in Bosnia had on that nation's children.

"There was this little girl who reminded

me of my daughter," said Mr. Miller. "I noticed when the other kids were laughing she was sullen, almost despondent. I asked some of the people from the orphanage about her, and they said they found her in one of the brothels that the Serbs set up for their army and she was grotesquely brutalized. That was my lowest moment."

Mr. Miller also encountered horrific tales when he spent two weeks at Fort Dix in 1999 gathering evidence of war crimes from about 7,500 refugees from Kosovo. The evidence gathered there was passed on to the International Court of Justice.

Despite the emotional toll of his involvement with Bosnia and Kosovo, Mr. Miller considers the work he did in the wake of Sept. 11 his most difficult.

"It was actually much tougher than the other work because it's home," Mr. Miller said. "The death certificate program began on Sept. 26, so the wounds were still very painful. [The family members] came to us when they had given up hope that their loved ones had survived."

The post-Sept. 11 work was made all the more difficult because NYCLA's offices were closed as a result of its proximity to the twin towers. The County Lawyers' staff was spread out all over the city, including many who worked out of Mr. Landy's law office.

Despite the logistical problems, NYCLA during that time also managed to set up a program providing free estate work for families of relief workers. The organization is also assisting the Civil Court with a program to help small businesses in the community recover.

"The first word that comes to mind is 'dedicated,' but Michael doesn't deserve a

clichéd assessment of his work," said Andrew Perkel, an Austin, Texas, police detective who drove to New York to volunteer his services after the attack and was assigned to the death certificate project. "There is no cliché to describe Michael."

### Looking Ahead

Looking ahead to his term as president of the County Lawyers', Mr. Miller says he will continue to focus on the association's efforts to provide adequate funding for the representation of indigents. The group will also continue to advocate for the independence of the judiciary under Mr. Miller, an issue he takes to heart.

"In my lifetime I don't believe that there have been more threats to the independence of the judiciary than there currently are," he said. "The first act that I will make is to appoint a task force committed to protect judicial independence."

Another focus of Mr. Miller's tenure will be the improvement of diversity in the legal profession. NYCLA, he notes, was the first bar association in the country to provide open enrollment, and was the only bar association and law library that welcomed future U.S. Supreme Court Justice Thurgood Marshall when he practiced in New York in the 1950's.

Underlying Mr. Miller's commitment to pro bono work, and the issues he intends to confront as County Lawyers' president, is his belief that the legal profession, although sometimes maligned, provides its practitioners more opportunity to engage in social change than any other profession.

"I am very genuinely proud to be a lawyer," Mr. Miller said. "We are the butt of a lot of jokes, and sometimes we deserve to be, but I have great pride in our profession and the nobility that is very much alive in it."

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