



LEGAL AFFAIRS

The interview: Mary K. Whitmer

Partner, Kohrman Jackson & Krantz

4:30 am, June 22, 2009

Mary K. Whitmer, a partner at the law firm of Kohrman Jackson & Krantz, was slated to take over the reins as president of the Cleveland Metropolitan Bar Association last Friday, June 19. *Crain's Cleveland Business* asked Ms. Whitmer about her hopes for the organization and about issues facing the Northeast Ohio legal community.

Q: What are your goals for the Cleveland Metropolitan Bar Association?

A: Over the next 12 months, we will strengthen our efforts to be a strong voice on issues affecting equal justice under the law: We expect the justice system to adjudicate claims fairly and evenhandedly; separate the guilty from the innocent; and prevent truly dangerous individuals from committing further crimes. We will continue to support our members who volunteer their time to teach and mentor in the Cleveland and East Cleveland public schools, with a focus on improving the Ohio Graduation Test scores for high school students. We will promote Greater Cleveland's reputation as a vibrant business and law center, with abundant opportunities for lawyers. And in recognition of the fact that Greater Cleveland is an exciting place to work, live and raise our families, as a bar association we will continue to seek out more and different ways for the attorneys in our association to make additional contributions to our community.

Q: It's been almost two years since the Cleveland and Cuyahoga County bar associations merged to form the Cleveland Metropolitan Bar Association. What are the benefits of having just one bar association serving Cuyahoga County? Are there any negatives?

A: First and foremost, we have discovered the joy of forming new relationships with colleagues who formerly were separated from each other. And without a doubt, our members enjoy a renewed sense of common purpose, with an easier path to collective success when all hearts and minds are committed to common goals. We are stronger financially. We've also found that by providing a unified voice for attorneys, we eliminate needless duplication, thereby improving efforts for pro bono and community service. We have not experienced any negatives.

Q: Has the economy changed the work of the Cleveland Metropolitan Bar Association? For example, is there a greater focus on pro bono initiatives?

A: The CMBA is committed to our partnership with the Legal Aid Society of Cleveland's Volunteer Lawyers Program to provide pro bono legal services to individuals in need. The economic climate certainly heightens the demand for service. One of our primary duties is to make the case to our members to increase their participation in providing pro bono legal service to our neighbors in need.

Q: Some law firms have felt the negative effects of the recession, resulting in attorney layoffs and shrinking workloads. Is the bar association doing anything to assist individual attorneys and firms during these down times?

A: In July, we will offer a course for attorneys in transition at no cost for attorneys without current positions. The CMBA also provides networking and marketing opportunities for our members. Regarding membership, we offer specialized payment structures and reduced rates for laid-off and part-time attorneys as well as volume pricing for continuing legal education for our individual members and law firms.

Q. Outside of the economy and its effects, what are some of the other top issues facing Northeast Ohio's legal community?

A. Assisting Northeast Ohio law firms to attract and maintain a diverse, professional work force; reviewing the process for rating judges to ensure that it is fair to those seeking to run for office and understandable to the public (e.g. Judge4Yourself.com); preserving the independence of the judiciary; advocating for fair and reasonable compensation for judges; building Greater Cleveland's reputation as a national center of legal excellence; championing economic development efforts to help strengthen the region; strengthening and expanding pro bono service; and providing other volunteer service to the Greater Cleveland community.

Q. The 3Rs Program — which pairs attorneys with high school sophomores — was honored this year by the American Bar Association. Are there any plans to expand that program or other bar association diversity initiatives?

A. We passionately believe there is a better chance of achieving equal justice under the law if the demographics inside the courthouse match the social demographics of the community outside the courthouse. It is no secret that minorities are underrepresented in most jobs serving the administration of justice.

It has long been CMBA's goal to reach out to minority high school and college students to inspire them to try law as a career. A little known fact is that the award-winning 3Rs Program, which supports the efforts of 500 volunteer lawyers who teach and provide mentoring in public high schools once a month during the school year, is just one of many diversity initiatives developed by the CMBA.

Other CMBA programs encourage law firms to hire high school interns over the summer and select qualified high school students to participate in the Stephanie Tubbs Jones Summer Legal Academy, an intensive three-week law course.

The CMBA also creates opportunities for minority clerkship positions for law students at law firms and judicial externship positions for minority law students in the federal and state courts. The CMBA is a national leader in developing diversity programming. Presently on the drawing board is a program to give minority college students summer work experience in the law.



Mary K. Whitmer

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