

What Matters Now?



Dana Warnez

Wow — I made it.

I could be jumping up and down, proudly singing fight songs, waxing sentimental, or pontificating like a boss, but really, as the 87th president of the State Bar of Michigan, all I am now is humbled and extremely grateful for the love and support that has been extended to me. I am ready, with the help of the Board of Commissioners, the Supreme Court and judiciary, our sections and committees, and our 47,000-plus members, to work through whatever the next year brings.

I have watched so many other wonderfully smart, energetic, generous, tenacious, outstanding people kick off their presidential year by offering sage advice and challenging us to come together despite our differences, with some quoting Harper Lee, Roberts P. Hudson, Winston Churchill, and William Shakespeare (not all in the same article, thankfully.) More than one of us have had a lawyer for a parent and honored them in their articles. But my favorite, most loved past president, Kimberly Cahill, when kicking off her year, asked us simply, what matters now?

This is always the magic question, isn't it?

So, the official answer now — as fleshed out from our Strategic Planning Committee and adopted by the Board of Commissioners — is two-fold.

The first priority is helping Michigan licensed attorneys be practice ready in areas of our chosen substantive expertise, but also in being proficient and effective with technology as the practice of law changes. Substantively, there are many ways to stay on top of things. Perhaps engage with ICLE or your local and specialty bar for sure, but have you thought about the opportunities afforded to you in section membership? Getting involved in section meetings will give you a natural place to continue to network with colleagues, ask questions, gain insight and knowledge about how to best handle your cases, share what you already know with others, and maybe even make new friends. Believe me, if you want to be active within the Bar, there's never been a more important time to get involved with a section.

The second priority is communicating how diversity, equity, and inclusion, rounded

in our ethical rules, is an essential component of the health and well-being of the legal profession. Throughout the pandemic, the Bar has hosted the Race and Justice Forum, a clearinghouse of resources that helps stimulate conversation, advance knowledge, foster understanding of differing perspectives, brainstorm solutions, and showcase opportunities to learn or help. Each program featured in the forum is something that one of our members from a local or affinity bar suggested as a resource.

We still seek contributions from the legal community. Click the banner at the top of the main page on the State Bar of Michigan website and see for yourself what your colleagues have been doing to advance diversity, equity, and inclusion. Maybe reading this will inspire you to start a program in your own community like a bias training program or an anti-racism pledge; you can use what others have done as a starting point for your efforts. Ultimately, what we all hope for is for the public to have greater confidence in our court system, because if litigants can't look around and see someone

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[I]f litigants can't look around and see someone like themselves in all areas of the justice system — or at least be treated with respect — then we risk that the public will lose confidence in our courts.

like themselves in all areas of the justice system — or at least be treated with respect — then we risk that the public will lose confidence in our courts.

Having said that, there are still other important things that we are doing that matter now.

I am chairing, with the support of consultant Elizabeth Derrico, a search committee composed of five past SBM presidents, the president-elect, Representative Assembly and Young Lawyers Section leadership, and a member of the Board of Commissioners to identify the very best person to serve as our next executive director after the impending retirement of our most admired and esteemed executive director, Janet Welch.

The Michigan Supreme Court is still seeking feedback from stakeholders on how to

best move forward and incorporate and implement improvements to the administration of justice that we've begun to identify during the very challenging time of the COVID-19 pandemic. Overhauling court rules so this happens effectively will be a major part of public policy efforts throughout the year. I encourage members to give ongoing feedback about your experiences so we can best serve the public in the future.

While things seem to be improving for many, the pandemic is not fully behind us. I was in touch with a second-year law student at the University of Detroit Mercy recently who is also a single parent. She described that while she'd love to attend in-person classes, she is choosing to take her classes online so if an outbreak forces her children's school to change from in-person

to online, she will be able to be home for her children. I don't know how she does what she does, and I was entirely in awe of her grace under these circumstances. I'm sure she has her moments, as we all do, when things seem impossible.

In the event you find yourself feeling overwhelmed, I remind you that the Bar has resources to help you. Specifically, the Bar offers online support groups you can join to discuss with other colleagues how to successfully navigate current challenges. Furthermore, you never know when you have the means to assist another person in our legal community who needs a little help. Please check out and opt in to the newly developed SOLACE program to make a difference.

I wish you all a productive and healthy bar year. ■

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