

2014-2015 Arkansas Bar Association

President Brian H. Ratcliff



Photo by W.I. Bell, Article by Anna Hubbard

The Arkansas Bar Association has Brian H. Ratcliff's full attention this bar year. In fact, the Association has already benefited from the countless hours he has devoted to the Association since he began his legal career. With the issues facing the Bar during the upcoming legislative session, the Association is fortunate to have the leadership of this hard working and dedicated attorney from El Dorado.

Brian was sworn in as the 117th president of the Arkansas Bar Association on June 13, 2014. The swearing-in ceremony by Chief Justice Jim Hannah took place during the Association's annual meeting at the Hot Springs Convention Center.

Although Brian's entire legal career has been geared toward serving as the Association's president, it was not a decision that he made lightly. As a devoted husband to his wife Karen, he ensured that she was on board with him taking the helm. Along with her unwavering support, he has the support

of his new law partners at PPGMR Law, PLLC along with the support of Association leaders.

Brian's appreciation of the Association's strong and proud heritage began with his first clerkship in law school when he clerked for the Shackleford, Shackleford & Phillips, P.A. law firm in El Dorado. The year was 1986 and Dennis Shackleford had recently completed his term as president of the Association. Later that year, he clerked for Bill Wilson who also had just completed a term as president. Shortly

after in 1988, Brian worked a year in the Goodwin, Hamilton & Moore law firm in Paragould with Harry Truman Moore who later became president of the Association. Brian later joined the Shackleford Law Firm in 1989 and remained there until this past spring when that firm became part of PPGMR Law in El Dorado.

"The timing was very good. It's hard to be president of the Bar Association and give it the time it needs with a two-person law firm," he said.

Brian's partner at PPGMR Law, Julie

Greathouse, said, “Brian jokes that he knew we must really be interested in him and El Dorado when we approached knowing how much time he would dedicate to his bar presidency in lieu of billing. The truth is, we had been interested in both Brian and an El Dorado office for years and knew we had a better shot at him in a year when he needed us too. Most of us had prior experience working with Brian and knew he was a great lawyer, but he is also a fine person whom we are all proud to call our partner.”

Brian’s former law partner Dennis Shackelford gave him his blessing shortly before passing away this February.

“Dennis told me that life is about changes, and if I thought this change was good for me then it was fine with him,” Brian said.

In addition to working with such great mentors as the late Norwood Phillips and the late Dennis and Marshall Shackelford, he also considers his longtime friend and former partner of 17 years, Teresa Wineland, a mentor. Teresa attests to Brian’s ability to serve the Association well as president.

“Brian has been preparing to lead the Bar Association since he joined our firm in El Dorado in 1989,” Teresa said. “Our mentor and partner, Dennis Shackelford, Bar President 1982-1983, made sure we understood the importance of service to the profession and put the full support of the firm behind us in our Bar activities. Dennis would be so proud to see Brian now following in his footsteps, providing strong leadership to the Bar Association, applying his unfailing work ethic to promotion of the Association and profession, and putting his amazing knowledge of Roberts Rules of Order to good use. As they travel the country this year, Brian and Karen will be outstanding representatives of the Association and the Arkansas Bar.”

Brian’s steadfast commitment to the Association over the past 26 years is impressive. He said that Dennis Shackelford taught him that you treat the Bar Association as you would a client. “You respond as they call, and you set aside time for your Bar work just like you would for a case.”

Harry Truman “H.T.” Moore encouraged Brian to get involved with the Young Lawyers Section (YLS) his first year of practice. “We were tickled when Brian accepted a job with us in Paragould,” H.T. said. “Because he was from El Dorado, I had called Dennis Shackelford, who was one of my mentors when I was in the YLS leadership track and Dennis was in the Presidential track in the ‘Big Bar.’ Dennis told me he would have hired Brian, but he didn’t have a place for him, so I should hire him and to get him involved in Bar work. I did both. When Dennis later had an opening, it was a great opportunity for Brian to return home, and I strongly suspected that Brian would become a leader in our bar. Did he ever.”

“There are two really good reasons why I’m so glad that Brian is serving as our President,” H.T. said. “First, I know he will do an outstanding job. Second, it will give Linda Lou and me a chance to visit with him and Karen at ABA meetings, especially since Brian is a great ‘foodie’ and always does a good job of researching the restaurants in host cities.”

When Brian contacted the chair of YLS, Rosalind Mouser, and asked her how to get involved, she suggested that he run for an executive council position that was open in



Karen and Brian Ratcliff
Photo by W.I. Bell

his district. He showed up for the election at the annual meeting in Hot Springs not realizing that he had an opponent, Scott Morgan. Scott, who is now his law partner at PPGMR Law, won the election.

Since he still wanted to get involved, in 1988 former Associate Director Judith Gray tasked Brian with working on a Senior Citizens Handbook, his first big project for the Association. He co-chaired the committee with Chuck Roskopf, who is currently serving as president of the Arkansas Bar Foundation.

In 1993, Brian was elected chair of YLS and has continued in leadership roles in the Association ever since. He chaired and served on numerous committees touching many aspects of the Association. He has chaired the Membership, House, Lawyer Referral Service and Arkansas FindaLawyer committees. Brian has also served on the Finance and Audit committees and chaired the Annual Meeting in 2004. He is a tenured member of the House of Delegates and served a three-year term on the Board of Governors. He has received three Golden Gavel awards and the Frank C. Elcan II

award for his work in the Association.

Brian was closely involved with the plans for moving and remodeling the new Bar Center. He served on the House Committee from 2002-2009 and the Design Committee from 2004-2007. Those experiences along with serving as president of the Arkansas Bar Foundation in 2008-2009 give Brian a unique perspective.

"I am very pleased with how the Bar center turned out," he said. "I love the building and am glad that members seem to be using it and enjoying it."

Brian is a partner at PPGMR Law, PLLC and manages the El Dorado office where his practice focuses on civil litigation defense. Like most attorneys, he also has a general law practice serving friends and family in El Dorado. As a young attorney, he started out on jury trials with minor motor vehicle accidents and even represented a client on death row. Now, with a push toward mediation, it is harder for younger attorneys to get that kind of trial experience, he said.

"Sending nasty letters, noticing depositions and posturing in the presence of clients does not make a good lawyer," Brian advises young attorneys. "You can be a good litigator and still be civil and get along."

Brian has remained close to his Paragould friends. Even though they now live in different parts of the state, the friends make concerted efforts to get together. The Bar Association events also help bring the group together. One of these long-time friends, Brad Broadway, testifies to Brian's strong work ethic.

"Brian and I were hired by the same small Paragould firm right out of law school," Brad said. "Brian would show up for work before any of the partners and leave with the last one at the end of the day. But, we were so green that we couldn't even find some courthouses in the area. We were handling small insurance subrogation cases, municipal court criminal matters, and examining abstracts. One day, Brian called the firm concerned that his DWI client had showed up for court intoxicated. They don't teach you how to handle that kind of thing in law school."

"He was single and all the other members of the firm were married," Brad added. "The spouses nicknamed him Ferris Bueller as he resembled Matthew Broderick while driv-

one of their own."

Paragould attorney Roger Colbert echoed Brad's support of Brian. Roger serves on the House of Delegates and was proud to watch Brian preside over his first meeting as president.

"It is gratifying to watch someone that you grew up with since law school attain this position," Roger said. "This is something that he has earned, and he will be an excellent Bar Association president. He has worked toward this for years."

Brian and Karen have been married for 15 years. They graduated El Dorado High School together in 1981, but did not reconnect until 1996.

"I would not have been mature enough for Karen at that time," Brian laughingly said. "Karen was much more mature than me, so it was good to go off to college first."

Brian earned his undergraduate degree in economics/business from Hendrix College in 1985 and his Juris Doctor from the University of Arkansas at Little Rock School of Law in 1988. He was born in Borger, Texas, and lived in three other states before settling in El Dorado in tenth grade. His father, Herman Ratcliff, retired as an engineer for Phillips 66. He and Brian's mother, Betty Jo, a retired teacher, still live in El Dorado. He has one brother, Bennet, who lives in New York.

It is important to Brian to have interests outside of the law office. He loves to cook and on any day, for fun, you can ask him what he cooked for dinner the night before. He enjoys trying new recipes and watching the Food Network. For several years, he has prepared steak dinners with bananas foster or cream brulee for dessert at the Association summer leadership retreats.

"One of the scarier things I ever did was a cooking demonstration for a Baptist church women's group," he said. "After I agreed to do this, I started thinking, here I am going to tell a bunch of women who have been cooking longer than I have been alive how to cook."

The ladies were won over by the baked baby pumpkins stuffed with risotto and biscotti. He is also a wine connoisseur and takes pleasure in knowing where a bottle of



Brian and Karen with Brian's father Herman and brother Bennett at the swearing-in ceremony



Brian and Karen with the chefs at Ferron Rice Mill in Verona, Italy



Brian and Karen with Valerie at a wine tasting

ing his sports car. Now, he no longer looks like Ferris Bueller, rarely handles real estate matters, and doesn't have intoxicated clients in court. He is busy handling multi-million-dollar lawsuits, travelling with his lovely wife, and is president of the Bar Association. The folks in Paragould are proud to call him



PROFILE

What is something about you that would surprise people to know?

I lived in Wyoming for seven years. I could snow ski before water ski and ice skate before roller skate.

Favorite meal to cook:

steak—any way

Favorite dessert:

bananas foster

Favorite cooking gadget:

food processor

A phrase to sum me up:

Hard working and dedicated

Why do you love your career:

It is very stimulating mentally. I'm always learning and doing something new.

wine comes from and pairing it with food. On a recent vacation with Karen to Italy, he had the opportunity to cook with chefs in Rome (Diane Seed), Florence (Sharon Oddson), and Verona (Gabriele Ferron). Their European vacation had even more meaning because they visited their former exchange student, Valerie Sovignet, who lives in Bourg-Argental, France. Brian and Karen affectionately call her their “adopted daughter.”

“We have been close with Valerie ever since she stayed a year with us in 2005,” he said. “She has been back several times to visit and we have traveled places together. She has taken us through vineyards in France. Last year, we took her for an American wine experience in Napa and Sonoma. We have been able to debunk some of the American anti-French attitudes.”

Gardening nicely complements his cooking passion. He grows herbs for his kitchen and also has over 40 rose bushes that he nurtures. He enjoys duck hunting with his dad and golden retriever, Lady. Their black lab, Noel, despite being found in cold water on a hunting trip as a puppy, turned out to be a better companion for Karen than a hunting dog. Brian plays basketball to stay in shape even though Karen warns him each time he goes out “to be careful playing with those young guys.”

In addition to representing his church, First Methodist of El Dorado, on various legal matters and serving on committees, he has twice portrayed the unruly disciple, Peter, in the play “The Last Living Supper.”

Brian served as president of the Union County Bar Association in 1998 and president of the Arkansas Association of Defense Counsel in 2001. In 2008 he was selected to be a member of the American Board of Trial Advocates.

“Brian is a wonderful example to all of us on the necessity of community involvement, a task already of great importance to me,” Julie Greathouse said. “He and Karen tirelessly serve so many worthy endeavors with the kind of grace we all hope to display. He hasn’t once whispered a complaint about the fullness of his plate in an age and profession where ‘busy-ness’ is sometimes mislabeled as a virtue.”

Like all strong leaders, Brian knows the importance of surrounding himself with capable and talented people. He has selected Teresa Wineland to lead the Legislation Committee. This is no small task for a Bar year in the course of a legislative session.

“Based on the last legislative session, it could be very pressing,” Brian said. “It is very important that the Association not alienate members, and I am very cognizant of that. Teresa and I have been through thick and thin together, and I trust her judgment.”

Teresa is ready for the task. “I appreciate Brian’s confidence in appointing me to this most important position at this critical time,” she said. “He has my commitment that the committee will work diligently and closely with the legislature during the upcoming session in an effort to protect and

further the interests of the Association, the profession, and the legal system.”

Another important issue facing the Association this year is looking at the Association’s malpractice insurance carrier. Little Rock attorney Larry Burks is chairing a task force to review the options and make recommendations.

“This is a monumental task and we want to make sure we do what is best for the Association,” Brian said.

Past President Jim Simpson is chairing another task force to review Rule 7 of the Rules Governing Admission to the Bar. Brian will work closely with the task force on this issue of attorney license suspension for failing to pay dues to the Court.

“The Supreme Court declared part of this rule unconstitutional as it failed to give due process before license suspension,” he said. “We anticipate a petition to the Court for a rule change.”

Regardless of the many distractions that may appear this year, Brian will remain centered on his commitment to the Bar Association and the legal profession. He is confident that while being president is a major commitment, he will have the support of committed and talented individuals all working together to achieve the goals of the Association.

“It is not the Bar Association president’s job to micromanage,” he said. “You’ve got good people, and good committees, and if you can’t trust those people to do a good job, then there are bigger problems.” ■