

# PRESIDENT'S PERSPECTIVE

JOHN E. KEEFE JR.

## Leading Lawyers Forward, Together

*Editor's note: John E. Keefe Jr. became the 120th president of the New Jersey State Bar Association at the Annual Meeting and Convention in Atlantic City last month. This is an excerpt of his installation speech.*

**"Each time a lawyer stands up for an ideal or acts to improve the lots of others, or strikes out against injustice, he sends forth a tiny ripple of hope..."—ROBERT F. KENNEDY**



**I** am honored, humbled and privileged to serve as the 120th president of the New Jersey State Bar Association.

We are 50 years removed from the tumultuous year that was 1968, a crossroads in American history marked by the violence that took from us the power, humanity and hope that was portrayed by Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and Senator Robert F. Kennedy.

As I embark on this year of leading the lawyers of New Jersey, I pause to recount the spirit of that time, 50 years ago, and to express the gratitude I feel in accepting this responsibility to contribute—in some small way—to the profession I truly love.

For those who know me, and to those who don't but I hope to meet in the year ahead, let me state this for the record: I love this profession, I love being a lawyer and I love being around good lawyers.

As your president, I pledge to continue the good work of this organization and all of the amazing presidents who selflessly served before me.

### Level the Malpractice Playing Field

This year, we will focus on *us*, the lawyers of New Jersey. We will celebrate this profession. We will *fight* for each other. We will *fight* for our futures. In doing so, we will work with our court system and our legislators. We will take pride in

what we do, and we will be there for each other.

As a plaintiff's lawyer, I have fought my entire career for access to the courts, preservation of our jury system and a level playing field. As your president, I will take that focus and work to ensure that we level the playing field for our profession when it comes to malpractice reform. Lawyers deserve to be on *equal footing* with doctors and other professionals in New Jersey. The bar, *and* the public, are *not* protected under our current system.

### Providing Mentors

We know from history that smart, soulful and hopeful minds are our best chance for a promising future. For us as a profession, that means new lawyers are our future. So, we must believe in, invest in, and mentor our new lawyers.

Historically, mentorship is the bedrock of this profession. Aspiring lawyers used to study, or 'read the law,' with a more seasoned lawyer in order to join the bar.

I was blessed with fabulous life mentors—all great people who generously shared with me their time and life's lessons.

As one of the cornerstone initiatives of my presidency, in the coming year, the NJSBA will start a web-based mentoring program that will match our new members with the leaders of the bar in various practice areas. We will help those newer members with their careers so that they can get out from under the massive debt they've incurred on their path to this profession.

### Building on Diversity and Inclusion

I will also work to build on the diversity initiatives we have undertaken over the past five years when we brought on our diversity director who, along with the chairs of our Diversity Committee and its many talented members, have done amazing things to foster inclusion in our association and our profession. We all need to always be looking around whatever room or whatever forum we are in to see who is missing from that room. And, we all need to be committed to working to ensure that those lawyers are included and are in that room as we move forward.

We have made great progress—this year adding three at-large seats to our Judicial and Prosecutorial Appointments

Committee for diverse lawyers and opening up this installation to all of our members to make it more inclusive—but we have much more to do. Our Judiciary must reflect all aspects of our society. A true diversity vision means we serve *all* of our members—and I do mean *all*.

In the next year, will we confront the issues we face today and ask: “How can we do better?” I look forward to asking that question, over and over again. I am excited by the very talented people who will endeavor to work with me this year to meet the challenge of that question.

### Offering Help in Times of Need

Lastly, I want to draw on my own experience this past year, when I was

diagnosed with throat cancer and underwent successful treatment, to focus on the obligation I believe we have to helping each other when one of us falls ill or has a sudden medical emergency, whether it be physical, emotional, psychological or a dependency issue. What would I have done without my family, my lawyer friends and colleagues to help me this past year?

We shouldn’t help only in the event of death, to guide an estate through a practice transfer. We can and will do better. I want to ensure that we also lend our hand to our members, especially lawyers in solo and small firms who don’t have partners or associates to rely on if they get sick. I look forward to sharing more on this important and very per-

sonal initiative in the months ahead.

### In Closing

I close with the brief thoughts of the two men who defined our American experience in 1968.

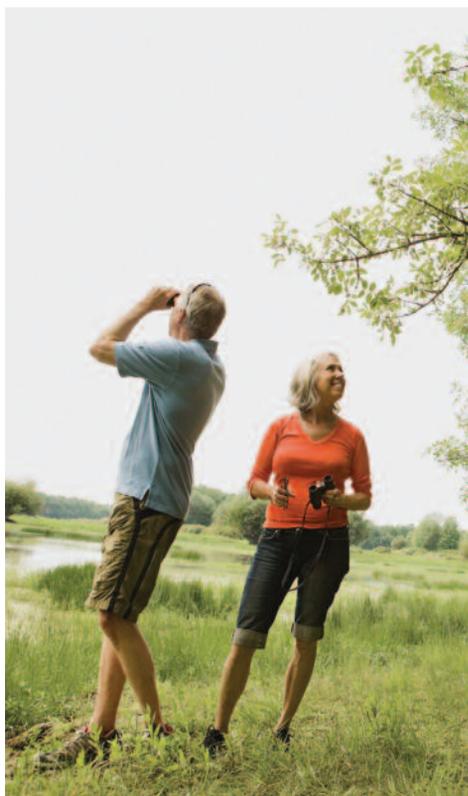
One of my favorite Martin Luther King Jr. quotes is appropriate for the coming year: “We may have all come in different ships, but we’re in the same boat now.”

And Robert Kennedy once said, very simply: “The purpose of life is to contribute, in some way, to make things better.”

My one request of you all is to be mindful of each other, respect the profession and each other.

We owe that to each other. ☪

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\*Greg Roberts has 32 years of experience. Ken Stewart has 24 years of experience.

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