

LAWYERS JOURNAL

THE FLAGSHIP PUBLICATION OF THE ALLEGHENY COUNTY BAR ASSOCIATION

Amy J. Coco assumes role of ACBA President

By Zandy Dudiak

Amy Coco plans to infuse the concept of health and wellness – the importance of which she knows all too well – into the vision for her one-year term of office as the new ACBA President.

Coco, who took office on July 1, hopes to build on the momentum started during Immediate Past-President Regina Wilson’s term, which focused on championing equity, diversity and inclusion, as well as creating a sense of belonging among members.

“My focus is going to continue on that, but with a different take,” Coco said.

One of the challenges Coco will face is to have the ACBA “stay out of the fray while staying true to our mission and value statement.” ACBA’s values statement calls for “fostering a culture of unbiased collegiality, ethics and professionalism; championing equality, diversity and inclusion in the profession; promoting equal access to legal and other law related services; and enhancing the success of members through education, networking, leadership and professional development.”

This will also be a transition year for the ACBA as it prepares for the retirement of long-time Executive Director David Blaner at the end of the fiscal year. Blaner planned to submit his resignation to Coco on July 1, the same day she assumed office.

“I joked with him, ‘You’ve got to find me to deliver the letter,’” Coco said. “Of course, we will miss him.”

The Executive Committee, including Coco, Wilson, President-Elect Dan Fitzsimmons, Treasurer Jesse Exilus and Secretary Joe Froetschel, will work with the Board of Governors over the next year to create a transition plan and finalize the appointment of a new Executive Director.

Those are goals that will be a focus for Coco, who is a shareholder in the firm of DiBella Weinheimer, handling professional liability work. She also serves as the part-time Director of the Pitt Legal Services Incubator Program.

But there is another goal that is dear to her heart.

“In my practice, I’ve seen some lawyers at different times in their careers,” Coco said. “Until we start taking care of ourselves – we can’t be professionals taking care of clients while we’re stressed.”

And that’s something Coco knows firsthand. She was diagnosed with stage four esophageal cancer and has undergone 20 months of “pretty serious treatment” and still is receiving maintenance treatment.

“My cancer is stress related,” she explained, caused by acid indigestion. “I am living proof in my cancer and personal life. If you don’t take care of yourself first, you’ll reach a point where you can’t take care of your clients.”

“I was very fortunate to have very good partners who supported me at that time,” she said, calling out Bethann Lloyd and Holly Whalen. In addition to work, she had support from law school classmates, family, friends, book club members and high school friends.

Told after her diagnosis during the pandemic that she needed to balance work with hobbies, Coco joined a former classmate who taught knitting over Zoom but found that it wasn’t very relaxing. But in time, she shifted and still meets to knit every Tuesday. Over time, she has learned to sleep more, eat right and take breaks to reboot.

“I feel good,” Coco noted. “I can’t fall back into that same 24/7. You need to have lawyer friends who can



PHOTO BY JAMES PIAGGIO

Regina Wilson passed the gavel to Amy Coco at the ACBA Bench-Bar Conference.

understand your work pressures, but also need friends not related to law.”

She likened self-care to the instructions about using oxygen masks in case of an emergency on plane flights.

“You have to learn to put your oxygen mask on,” she explained. “Only then can you help somebody else.”

Coco hopes to guide the ACBA to focus more on health and wellness programming. During a conference in Chicago, she experienced a “puppy stress break” where attendees had a chance to hold and pet puppies.

“I also want to focus on the sense of belonging in communities,” Coco said. “One of my goals is to form little subcommittees out of the Health and Wellness Committee. The hope is people can make some friendships that endure.”

Coco envisions small groups of five to 15 ACBA members with common interests, such as lawyer cancer survivors, bicyclers, swimmers, readers and those

dealing with anxiety and mental health issues. The groups would design what they want to do and how often to meet.

Building membership is another goal Coco has for her term. Younger generations tend not to be joiners, she said, recalling that she joined the bar because someone invited her. Initially, she joined the substantive Lawyers Committee and Ethics Committee “to improve my professional skills.”

A benefit of bar membership is that young lawyers get to know judges and attorneys in a situation outside a courtroom or business transaction. Networking gives members an opportunity to interact on a more personal level and feel more comfortable with other legal professionals. In the case an attorney makes a mistake or needs more time, it can be helpful to know a judge or opposing counsel, Coco said.

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Right on! Bench-Bar ‘60s celebration a success

By Ron Cichowicz

The 2025 ACBA Bench-Bar Conference offered plenty of good vibes to its approximately 560 attendees who gathered to let it all hang out at the Seven Springs Mountain Resort in the Laurel Highlands, June 12-14.

This year’s theme saluted the ‘60s decade, and it didn’t take long for everyone to dig the scene and do their own thing while they enjoyed the traditional spirit of fun, education and camaraderie which are the hallmarks of Bench-Bar.

Even though attendance was down just slightly from 2024 due largely to the U.S. Open occurring on competing days in nearby Oakmont, the conference was another outta sight success.

“We had a lot of excitement around a really cool theme,” said Mary Ann Fiorilli, ACBA Director of Membership, Events and CLE. “Both the social and educational components were well received and well attended.”

Fiorilli said that all the sporting and health and wellness events were



PHOTOS BY JAMES PIAGGIO

popular, especially golfing and clay shooting. There also was the traditional barbecue and on Friday night attendees enjoyed a Motown band and strolling buffet with guest appearances by both Austin Powers and Foxy Brown.

Fiorilli also highlighted two new attractions, the first being a Cigar and Bourbon Tasting event, which drew more than 100 individuals. Fiorilli credited Greg and Shawn from Dirty

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2025 ACBA Bench-Bar sporting event winners

Golf Tournament

1st Place:
Hon. Cathleen Bubash, Brian Rosinski, Jay Voelker and Audrey Fox

2nd Place:
Gregg Ogg, Billy Goodrich, Anthony Mengine and John Noble

3rd Place:
Brian Thompson, Dan Schimizzi, JJ Richardson and David Ross

#16 Longest Drive – Women:
Rebeca Himena Miller

#16 Longest Drive – Men: Jay Voelker

#3 Closest to the Pin: Kim Bodnar

#6 Closest to the Pin: Billy Goodrich

#11 Closest to the Pin: Will Robinson

#15 Closest to the Pin: Brian Rosinski

#9 Longest Putt: Andrew Rothey

#18 Longest Putt: Emily Wagner

Sporting Clays

1st Place:
Efrem Grail, Rich Thiele, Joe Gaydos and Steven Engel

Highest Overall: Joe Gaydos

Highest Score – Women:
Frankie Exler

Highest Score – Men: Rich Thiele


Pickleball Tournament

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3rd Place: Neil Isler





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Paul has been listed as an AV® Preeminent™ lawyer by Martindale-Hubbell, representing the recognition of the highest level of professional excellence by his peers, since 2000. He has been recognized as a Pennsylvania Super Lawyer from 2007-2011 and 2014-2024.


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Bryan Neft becomes ACBF President, building on 25 years of bar service

By Zandy Dudiak

Bryan Neft assumed his new role as President of the Allegheny County Bar Foundation on July 1, bringing with him a quarter century of leadership with the Foundation and the ACBA.

Neft most recently served as ACBF Vice President.

The ACBF is a driving force in promoting justice for all and to improve the community through public service law-related programs as the ACBA's charitable arm.

"There's nothing I'm not proud of," Neft said, discussing the many charitable efforts of the ACBA. "One of my goals is to educate everyone on the work we do at the Foundation."

He is hoping to begin developing the Foundation's five-year strategic plan next year. He also plans to work on strengthening the relationship between the ACBF and ACBA, continue expanding the work of the Pro Bono Center and grow the Fellows GIVES program that helps the



PHOTO BY JAMES PIAGGIO

ACBF Trustee Gilda Arroyo passed the gavel to Bryan Neft at the ACBA Bench-Bar Conference.



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Foundation provide funding to deserving legal aid programs and grow the endowment. He's also hoping the ACBF hires a part-time grant writer to tap into additional funds to support its programs.


Neft first became involved in the ACBF in 2000, when he was asked by Amy Greer to take over for her and Kenny Steidl in chairing the Attorneys Against Hunger (AAH) campaign, which has raised more than \$3 million for hunger relief in Allegheny County. He chaired the program until 2012.


He serves on the committee for the annual fundraising campaign, which collects money to distribute to Allegheny County food banks. The

effort includes direct mail solicitations and advertisements, encouraging ACBA members to donate and coordinating with the grant recipients.

Initially, the recipients were the Greater Pittsburgh Community Food Bank, Just Harvest and the Urban League's Hunger Services. Over time, AAH has grown to serve downtown Ministerium Walk-in Ministry, Allies for Health + Wellbeing, Casa San Jose, East End Cooperative Ministry, The Intersection, Jubilee Soup Kitchen and Food Pantry, North Hills Community Outreach, Rainbow Kitchen, South Hills Interfaith Movement and the Squirrel

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Former Pa. Governor Tom Corbett receives 2025 Amram Award

By Ron Cichowicz

Former Pennsylvania Governor Tom Corbett was named the 2025 recipient of the Philip Werner Amram Award at the Allegheny County Bar Association Bench-Bar Conference.

The prestigious Amram Award was established in 1990. The award’s namesake, Philip Werner Amram, had a legal career that exceeded six decades. Amram, renowned as a legal scholar, excelled in the practice of international law. Amram, who served as Chair of the U.S. delegation to the 1972 Hague Conference on International Private Law, was an expert settling legal disputes between private citizens of different countries.

He devoted a lifetime to pursuing excellence in the law. He chaired the Pennsylvania Supreme Court’s Committee on Civil Procedure Rules from 1958 to 1982. Regarded as an expert on Pennsylvania law who authored several books related to state law, Amram died in 1990 at age 90.

Given in the spirit of the conference, the Philip Werner Amram Award recognizes those who personify professional excellence and who have demonstrated substantial commitment to the ideals of the Allegheny County Bar Association and to the betterment of the greater community.

By that measure, Corbett’s nomination is both unassailable and long overdue on both counts.

“He should have been nominated earlier,” said Judge Christine Ward who, along with Judge Kim Eaton,

submitted Corbett’s name for the award. “He deserved it for years. The award is given to someone who embodies the spirit of Bench-Bar, who encourages camaraderie and mentorship, and Tom is a prime example of that. He attended every year, even while he was Governor, he golfed, served on panels and made sure he mingled with the younger folks.”

“He has always been committed to Bench-Bar and what it stands for.”

Each year, strident efforts are made to keep secret the name of the winner until the day it is presented and this year was no different. Judge Eaton made sure Corbett attended the luncheon where the award is announced by telling him that a friend would be honored.

“We made sure he would be there,” said Judge Ward. “We didn’t say anything about the award to anyone.”

Corbett admitted he had been successfully duped by his friends.

“I was shocked and surprised,” he said. “Kim Eaton set me up. Even when I was sitting at the luncheon before the announcement and hadn’t seen my friend who I thought would be honored, I didn’t connect the two. Truthfully, anyone who has been chair of Bench-Bar thinks they might receive the award, but I was chair 30 years ago, so I didn’t think it would happen now.

“This was a big award for me,” Corbett admitted. “It brought a few tears to my eyes.”

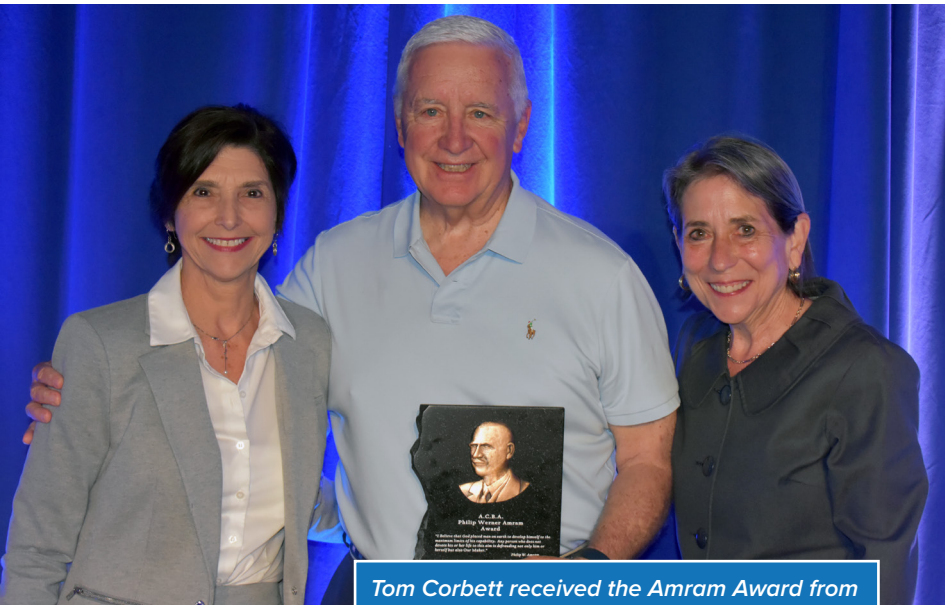


PHOTO BY JAMES PIAGGIO

Tom Corbett received the Amram Award from Hon. Lisa Lenihan and Hon. Christine Ward at the ACBA Bench-Bar Conference.

Corbett may have been surprised to receive the award, but his qualifications are undeniable.

Currently employed as Counsel for Spilman Thomas & Battle, LLC, Corbett served as Pennsylvania’s 46th Governor from 2011 to 2015. Prior to that, he held positions as Assistant U.S. Attorney General, U.S. Attorney, Chair of the Pennsylvania Commission on Crime and Delinquency and Pennsylvania Attorney General.

A key advisor to U.S. presidents and governors, Corbett is a distinguished executive in residence at the Thomas R. Kline School of Law of Duquesne University, where he recently served

as an adjunct professor. He received his undergraduate degree from Lebanon Valley College and his law degree from St. Mary’s University School of Law. He also was a member of the Pennsylvania National Guard from 1971 to 1984, rising from private to captain.

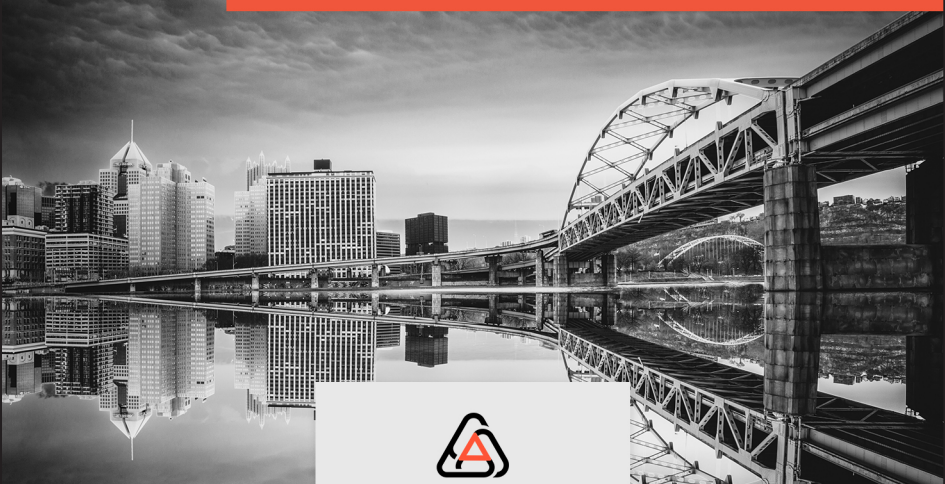
Once the reality of receiving the award sunk in, Judge Ward said Corbett gave a powerful acceptance speech.


“Tom was very emotional,” she recalled. “I’ve never seen him be so emotional. You could tell it meant a lot to him. Some people, because they don’t know they are receiving the

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New decision on calculation of DUI offenses has unexpected consequences



By David Shrager and
Lyle Dresbold

The criminal bar has been scrambling since May 30, when the Pennsylvania Supreme Court decided the case of Commonwealth v. Shifflett, reshaping how DUI offenses are calculated and evoking disparate reactions from elected District Attorneys throughout the Commonwealth.

The minimum and maximum penalties for DUI are determined based on the Blood Alcohol Content (BAC) of the defendant and the number of prior DUI offenses during a ten-year lookback period. In addition to prior convictions, the statute includes in the definition of prior offenses, any previous admission into the Accelerated Rehabilitative Disposition (ARD) program.

ARD is a program that, in the sole discretion of the district attorney, is typically offered to defendants who are facing a first DUI and who have no previous criminal history. ARD is not a conviction, it is a diversionary program wherein the charges are held in abeyance while the defendant completes requirements such as probation, community service, safe driving classes, and a license suspension.

Successful completion of the program results in a dismissal and potential expungement of the charges. In contrast, a conviction for a first DUI is an ungraded misdemeanor with a maximum penalty of six months incarceration.

In Shifflett, the Court determined that acceptance of ARD may no longer be used at sentencing to increase the penalty of a subsequent DUI. Their reasoning is based on the United States Supreme Court cases of Apprendi and Alleyne. In those cases, the High Court ruled that any fact which increases the maximum possible penalty, or the mandatory minimum penalty, must be an element of the crime, submitted to the jury, and proven beyond a reasonable doubt. The only exception to this rule is proof of a prior conviction. Our Supreme Court held that acceptance of ARD is a fact for the purposes of Apprendi and Alleyne and that it does not fall into the prior conviction exception because it is different from a conviction and does not have the same procedural safeguards. As there is no mechanism to add as an element of the offense and submit to the jury the question of prior ARD admission, the Court held that enforcement of that section of the enhancement statute is unconstitutional.

The immediate consequence of Shifflett is that defendants who previously completed ARD for DUI and are now facing new DUI charges will not have their prior ARD used against them to increase the penalties. Many defendants in this situation have been

continuing their cases in hopes that this ruling would benefit them. In some cases, a defendant's exposure is significantly decreased.

This is not the first time the criminal bar has faced this issue. In 2021 the Superior Court decided the case of Commonwealth v. Chichkin. Chichkin raised the same issues as Shifflett and was decided in the same way. For a year, defendants who were charged with a new DUI after having completed ARD received the benefit of lower minimum and maximum penalties. Some prosecuting agencies attempted to circumvent Chichkin by insisting on a waiver or stipulation which could be used in subsequent prosecutions to increase penalties. Before the waivers could be challenged, the Superior Court reversed itself in Commonwealth v. Moroz, restoring the pre-Chichkin status quo allowing ARD to be used as a prior offense.

The Allegheny County District Attorney has not responded to Shifflett by announcing any significant changes to the way it handles ARD. The same cannot be said for other prosecuting agencies throughout the Commonwealth. In many counties the District Attorney will no longer offer ARD to defendants whose BAC is above .159, who have any drugs in their system including medical marijuana or other prescription drugs, or who refuse chemical testing of blood or breath. A few counties have stopped offering ARD for DUI altogether.

Some prosecutors will admit that their hardline stances are intended as

an attempt to force the legislature to restore the status quo. Already there is a bill making its way through committee with the support of the Pennsylvania District Attorneys Association that they believe would cure the issue by making prior ARD acceptance an element of the offense. Other legislative options include taking some of the discretion to offer ARD away from the individual prosecutor in favor of a more uniform system. All of the options being debated have drawbacks and will inevitably invite future challenges.

ARD is intended to give defendants with no prior record the opportunity to dispose of their criminal charges without doing permanent damage to their criminal record. Although the Shifflett decision benefits repeat offenders, the reaction by some prosecutors will harm first time offenders. Eventually the legislature may act, until then practitioners will have to continue to navigate a landscape that is different in every county and continues to change every day. ■

David Shrager is the Managing Partner and CEO of Shrager Defense Attorneys, a full-service criminal litigation firm. Lyle Dresbold is a Senior Trial Attorney at the firm.

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AMY J. COCO

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Coco has served as a Governor on the ACBA Board, is a past chair of the ACBA's By-Laws Committee, and is past chair and a current duty officer for the Professional Ethics Committee. She also served on Council for the Sole and Small Firm Practitioners Section and chaired subcommittees for the Women in the Law Division. She also has high praise for the Young Lawyers Division and the ACBA affinity groups. She earned a journalism degree in 1989 from Indiana University and a J.D. in 1994 from the University of Pittsburgh School of Law. She worked as a paralegal for two years before going to law school, then as a law clerk during law school. She started her career at Weinheimer Schadel & Haber as an associate in August 1994. ■

BENCH-BAR SUCCESS

CONTINUED FROM FRONT PAGE

Dog Cigar Shoppe in McKeesport for making it happen. The second new feature for 2025 was a Team Trivia competition organized by David Fudor, a Partner with Bennington Law Firm. "David offered to take this on and delivered quite the lively competition that attracted over 90 participants, with all having a fabulous time," Fiorilli said. Hon. Lisa Pupo Lenihan (ret.), the Bench-Bar Conference Committee Chair said, "We had an excellent time in the evenings, particularly on Friday night, where I was told the band was

the best ever at Bench-Bar, and that we should book them every year!" Judge Lenihan added that she was extremely pleased with the overall conference. "Our attendance was very solid, especially considering that we were competing with the U.S. Open," she said. "We also had great attendance by the judiciary, which is what makes this conference as special as it is. Our federal judges' attendance was a record number this year and I also want to note that we had three Pennsylvania Supreme Court justices, as well as judges from the Superior and Commonwealth Courts." Fiorilli echoed Judge Lenihan's gratitude to the representatives of the judiciary who attended Bench-Bar and added much to the programming. Also new this year was the offering of six new Continuing Judicial Education programs, which attracted more than 40 judges from across Pennsylvania and elsewhere. "I want to personally thank all of the judges who took time from their busy schedules to attend the conference as well as speak on panels," said Judge Lenihan. "The educational offerings were excellent." Fiorilli noted that for the first time the conference invited law students from both the University of Pittsburgh and Duquesne Kline School of Law to participate. "Both had a table to welcome alumni," she said. "This was very successful. Three quarters of our membership at Bench-Bar was a graduate of one or the other school and very happy to be welcomed by

'their' school. The alumni received swag from their schools and for the law students in attendance, they got exposed to what we at the bar association are doing." All in all, general consensus regarding the 2025 Bench-Bar was that it was right on! But the best may be yet to come, as plans are already being made for Bench-Bar 2026, June 18-20, which will feature a special tribute to ACBA Executive Director David Blaner, who is retiring next year. "It's only fitting that we celebrate Dave at Bench-Bar," said Fiorilli. "After 35 years, one night will not do him justice." Fiorilli added that Blaner loves the beach and is moving to South Florida and that the 2026 Bench-Bar Conference may feature a beach theme. "I look forward to next year when we are celebrating Dave Blaner's many years of service to the ACBA," said Judge Lenihan. ■

BRYAN NEFT
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Hill Food Pantry, which provides Kosher and Halal food. "We've been really successful to spread the wealth over all of Allegheny County," Neft said. "I'm particularly proud of that." Neft also serves on the Fellows GIVE Committee, which oversees building the ACBF's endowment and funding the ACBF's legal aid grants. The committee members approve nominations for new Fellows, establish policy and procedures, coordinate the annual reception and dinner where

new members are inducted into the program, and act as ambassadors for Fellows GIVE. For the ACBF, he also has served as a Fellow, Sustaining and Patron Fellow; Treasurer; member of the Board of Trustees; on the Fellows Subcommittee; Loan and Scholarship Committee; and Lawyers' Fund Committee. When the ACBF endowment campaign began in 2020, Neft said there was no difficulty in getting people to contribute, despite the conditions created by the pandemic. "I never let that stop me from asking for contributions," he said. "We've been very good about talking to members of the Bar about getting involved. It's a very easy sell to members of the Bar. The challenge (in fundraising) is to get the community at large involved." When the campaign ended in 2021, the ACBF had raised \$1.5 million in funds to provide pro bono services, award legal aid grants and continue to make a meaningful difference in both the community and profession. Neft also called out the importance of the Pittsburgh Pro Bono Partnership, a collaboration of legal departments, law firms, the ACBF and Neighborhood Legal Services that provides attorney and paralegal pro bono legal services to people of limited means in the greater Pittsburgh community and the charities that work on their behalf. "We have been so successful in generating funds," he said, noting that has meant an exponential increase in the number of people getting pro bono services.

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TOM CORBETT AMRAM AWARD | CONTINUED FROM PAGE 4

award, stumble through their thank-you speech. But he didn't. His comments were heartfelt and inspiring."

Corbett said he felt it was important in his comments to talk about the bar in general, the importance of Bench-Bar and the collegiality that has developed among and between the bench and lawyers. He noted that the time he put into Bench-Bar was fun but educational and important for relationship building.

"We're truly unique," he said. "I don't know of anywhere else in the country that has what we do."

"Because of my career, I've been honored with awards in many different areas. But the Amram has to rank as number one or two because of my commitment to the bar association and to our profession."

Reflecting on that career, Corbett said he has "a certain amount of belief that the Lord has a plan for each of us."

He expressed gratitude for the life and career he has experienced. Married 53 years to his wife Susan and living in his boyhood home in Glenshaw, the couple has two children. Their daughter Kate, an Assistant U.S.

Attorney, has four children and son Tom, who teaches at Carnegie Mellon University, has twin sons.

Corbett said his hobbies include golf and reading and that he and his wife like to travel. Mostly though, he enjoys watching his grandchildren grow.

Judge Ward, put it most succinctly, "Tom is my friend, a solid citizen and a stand-up guy." ■

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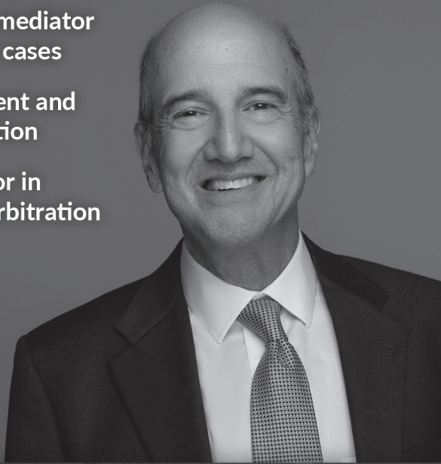
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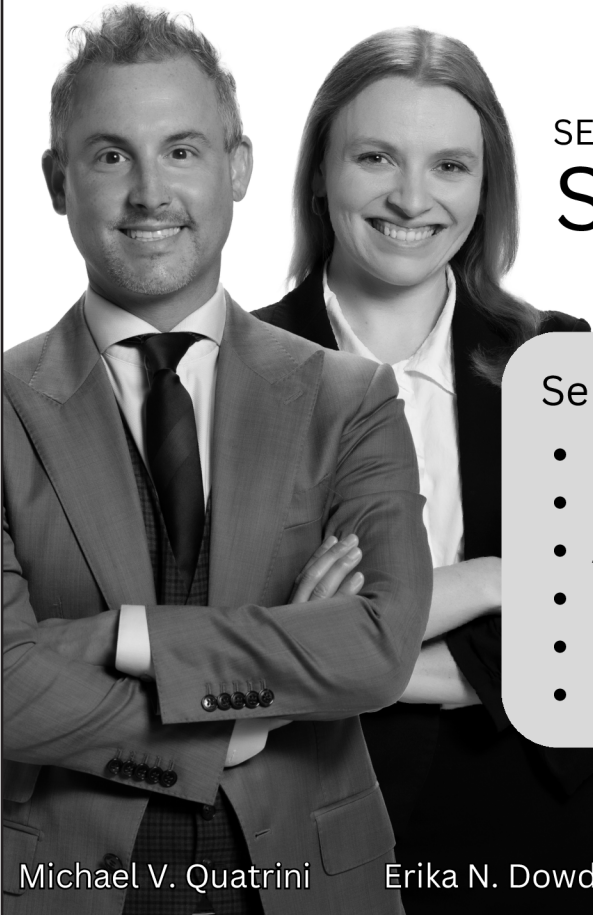


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PRESIDENT’S MESSAGE

New ACBA President asks ACBA members to place health and wellness at the center of their professional lives



By Amy J. Coco

Editor’s note: ACBA President Amy Coco delivered the following speech at the 2025 ACBA Bench-Bar Conference.

Judges, colleagues, and friends – thank you for being here. Receiving this gavel today is an honor I promise to never take lightly. Looking at the list of the Past-Presidents, I’m incredibly humbled and a little awestruck to be joining that group.

Many of my Pitt Law classmates have showed up for me today, and when we graduated and joined the profession in 1994, Eric Springer was the ACBA President. Mr. Springer was the ACBA’s first African American president and the first president I had the pleasure to personally know. Mr. Springer exemplified professionalism, and unquestioned integrity and he focused his leadership on serving the community and championing diversity.

Fast forward 30 years, and Regina Wilson took over with the same values and goals. I can’t thank her enough for all she has done this past year to move our association forward in collegiality, diversity, inclusion, and celebrating belonging. I have seen behind the scenes how dedicated she is to all of you and her efforts to bring many voices to the table. She will leave big shoes to fill.

On July 1, I will become the 117th president, and the 13th woman to lead this organization. Five years ago, Lori McMaster passed the gavel to Elizabeth Hughes, marking the first time the gavel had been passed from one woman to another. For the first time in our association’s history, the gavel has passed from one woman to another for three consecutive years. Next year, I will be honored to pass it (along with the tiara) to Dan Fitzsimmons. And I look forward to working with him and the new Board over the next year. I also look forward to working with Dave Blaner but especially because I will be his last President, as he’s got it in his mind that he’s going to retire to Florida after more than 30 years with the ACBA.

He assumed the role of Executive Director in 2001. And because we’re talking about connections – the 2001 President was the third woman president – Amy Greer. So, David, you started as ED with an Amy, and you’ll end with one. Full circle.

This year I want to continue to improve our feelings of belonging in a slightly different fashion by asking the association members to place health and wellness – our own and each other’s – at the center of our professional lives. At the core of health and wellness is finding those connections and community.

Everyone has heard the standard flight instruction: “Put your own oxygen

mask on first before assisting others.” It is practical, even obvious – yet how often do we, as legal professionals, ignore that advice on the ground?

Every day my practice reminds me what happens when we don’t put our own oxygen masks on first. For more than 30 years I have defended lawyers, judges, and law students facing disciplinary complaints or liability claims. Peel back the layers of my cases and there’s the same culprits:

unaddressed anxiety, burnout, depression, substance use born of relentless stress. Our profession is stressful. Our job is guiding people

continued on page 10

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BRYAN NEFT

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 6

Neft serves on the board of the Pennsylvania Interest on Lawyers' Trust Accounts (IOLTA) Board, which makes grants annually to nonprofit organizations, law school clinical programs, and administration of justice projects that provide civil legal services free of charge to people who are poor and disadvantaged.

"The latest survey shows that for every dollar spent on legal aid, there is \$12 derived economic benefit over time," Neft explained. "If you have a legal aid program and allow people to stay in their homes, they can become self-sufficient and have a stable environment."

Neft arned his undergraduate degree from the University of Pennsylvania and his J.D. from the Boston University School of Law. He is a member at Spilman Thomas & Battle, where he practices commercial litigation, health care and product liability.

Neft served as ACBA President from 2018-19 and Treasurer from 2014-16. He served on the Board of Governors from 2004-07, 2008-16 and 2017-20. He is a member of the Homer S. Brown Division, Women in the Law Division (Gender Bias Subcommittee), Civil Litigation Section, Bench-Bar Committee, Finance Committee and LGBTQ+ Rights Committee.

He is also a member of the Disciplinary Board of the PA Supreme Court, the ABA and PBA Houses of Delegates and serves on several PBA committees. ■

PRESIDENT’S MESSAGE | CONTINUED FROM PAGE 9

through conflict in an adversarial system. We're paid to argue. Some days I spend the entire day saying, "No – you can't do that. No – not that either." It's draining. We meet clients at some of the worst moments of their lives, and we're expected to be problem-solvers, not the ones who need help. Yet, as a profession, we are notoriously reluctant to admit we're struggling – let alone ask for assistance. The result is predictable: talented people suffocate for lack of oxygen while still trying to save everyone else.

I learned that personally in 2020. I was diagnosed with stage IV esophageal cancer which is a stress-related cancer caused by acid reflux. At this diagnosis, suddenly wellness was not a luxury or a CLE topic, it was lifesaving oxygen. Chemotherapy, radiation and immunotherapy forced me to slow down, to breathe, to accept help. When I was forced to put on my oxygen mask, surprisingly to me, my clarity as a lawyer sharpened. My empathy deepened. That experience has reminded me to tend to myself so I can better serve my clients.

None of us puts on our masks alone. I'm so grateful that so many of my communities are here today.

First my family: My family, whose love and support is the air I breathe every single day. My husband of almost 35 years, Jeff. My sons, Cameron and Jordan, a macromolecular engineer and a chemistry major heading into pharmaceutical research, so

probably not future Allegheny County Bar Association members.

Some of my dear friends from my book club community are here a testament to the facts that a good book, a good meal and great conversation can lower blood pressure better than medicine.

Pitt Law '94 – I truly love all of you. My small community, my study group, I really wouldn't be here without you and several of you traveled from far away to be here to support me. Sharon Webb, Dan Brandeis and Jim Meinert and Stephanie Cooper.

My PBA friends, you are truly some of my best leadership mentors and support and I can't believe so many of you made the drive. Kathleen Wilkinson, Past PBA President – you are my wellness guru.

And last, but definitely not least, my law firm community. Thank you for your past support and please forgive me for this next year – but especially for Holly Whalen and Bethann Lloyd – my partners who keep reminding me you're going to need help. Just ask.

I'm so grateful for all of the support from those of you here, and too many others to mention. Thank you.

So what will we do, together, in the year ahead?

Normalize the conversation. We will talk openly about mental health, addiction, grief, stress and fatigue at committee meetings, CLEs, and yes, even happy hours. Silence is the petri dish in which stigma grows. I'm going to challenge committees to add at least one wellness effort or activity this

year. Bonus points for any group that does a puppy petting event.

I will help you all find connection and community in the ACBA by starting small peer group communities where lawyers connect over shared interests and challenges to strengthen well being together. From three lawyers to 10-15 at most. The first few I intend to form are personal. One for sandwich generation lawyers, raising kids and caring for aging parents; and one for cancer survivors.

So this is your oxygen mask moment.

I invite each of you to set one private intention for improving your wellness over the next year. Write it down and share it with a colleague. Ask for help in reducing your stress and give yourself grace. Hold each other accountable.

Finally, to the Bench-Bar Committee, thank you for making this conference feel less like a meeting and more like a reunion. Judge Lenihan and Andrew Roth, you've done an amazing job. And of course, to our extraordinary staff, none of this would be possible without you doing all the work to make our ideas become reality.

And thank you to every one of our members. If you are sitting here as a lawyer who is not a member, stop by outside and sign up for the next year, and remember to put on your oxygen mask. ■

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Tuesday, August 19 | Noon | Live Webinar | 1 Ethics credit

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Wednesday, August 27 | 4 p.m. | Dollar Bank Corporate Headquarters
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Digital Forensics and eDiscovery in Construction Law

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**Reception to follow courtesy of bit-x-bit*

Register today at **ACBA.org/calendar.**



Reader beware: Seemingly innocent emails can have significant negative consequences



By John Unice

A seemingly innocuous email led to catastrophic consequences for “Sarah,” a freelance graphic designer. Enticed by a message titled “Exciting Project Opportunity,” she opened an attachment labeled “ProjectBrief.pdf,” unknowingly triggering a sophisticated malware infection. Initially manifesting as minor system issues, the malware soon compromised her banking credentials, resulting in unauthorized international withdrawals and the loss of her savings.

This scenario underscores the legal and operational risks associated with cyber intrusions, particularly for professionals (like attorneys and many of our clients) reliant on digital infrastructure. Malware – malicious software designed to infiltrate and control systems – can silently exfiltrate sensitive data, including communications, credentials, and proprietary files. Legal practitioners should advise clients on proactive cybersecurity measures:


- Maintaining updated systems
- Exercising caution with unsolicited communications
- Using strong, unique passwords with multi-factor authentication, and
- Employing reputable antivirus solutions.

Sarah’s situation highlights the importance of digital hygiene and the potential liability exposure stemming from inadequate cybersecurity protocols.

For more information, visit ACBA.org/Emails. ■


ACBA member John Unice is the CEO of bit-x-bit. Tech tips appear monthly in the ACBA Sidebar e-newsletter, courtesy of the ACBA Legal Technology and E-Discovery Committee, and the June 2025 OUCH! Newsletter, a free monthly security awareness newsletter published by the SANS Institute.

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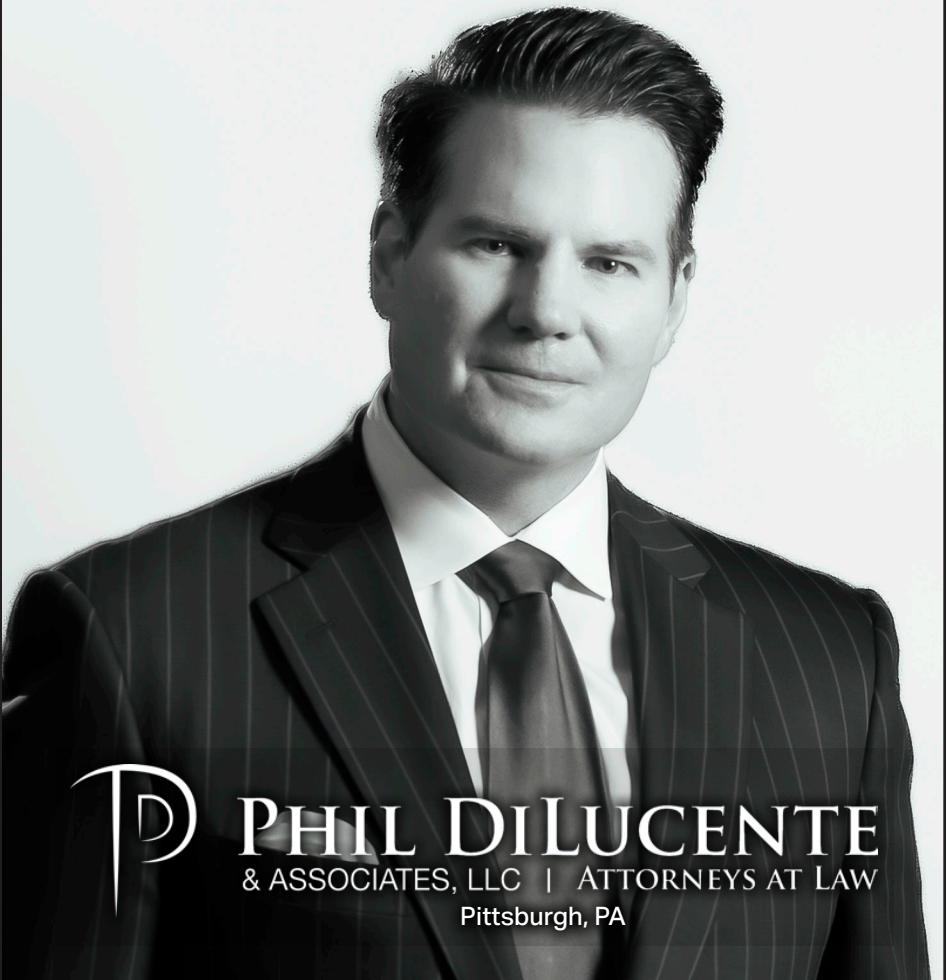
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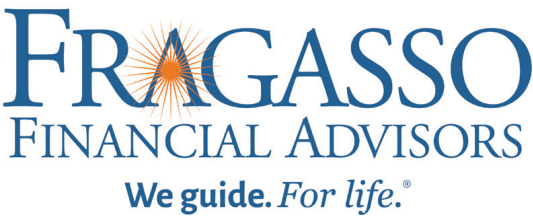
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