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New Allegheny County Bar President Plans Upcoming Term

By **James Boyle**

Law360 (June 30, 2021, 4:34 PM EDT) -- Thursday is the beginning of Joe Williams' yearlong term as the 113th president of the Allegheny County Bar Association.



Joe Williams

Williams, a partner at Pittsburgh-based family law firm Pollock Begg, is one of the youngest attorneys to take on the role. He is pretty sure he is the youngest, but the association's records don't go back far enough to confirm.

He replaces Elizabeth Hughes, who finished her term on Wednesday. Before becoming ACBA president, Williams was heavily involved with the organization almost immediately after earning his law degree from Duquesne University School of Law in 2009. He has been a chair of the Young Lawyers Division and a member of the Public Service, Diversity, Education and Member Services subcommittees and served on the board of governors.

Williams spoke with Law360 Pulse on Wednesday about his agenda for the next 12 months and how the ACBA can help the community at large. This interview was edited for length and clarity.

Why did you want to be the Allegheny County Bar Association president?

The Allegheny County Bar Association is one of the most celebrated and recognized bar associations in the country. The opportunity to be one of its leaders is certainly an honor.

I'm proud of my own success. Some of that has to do with my hard work and talent, but the bar association is the noun that best describes why I had success at a young age. It enhanced my profile with judges, connected me with lawyers I would not otherwise have met and gave me opportunities for public service. Plus, I made a lot of good friends. After getting so much out of an organization, it's natural to want to create those opportunities for others as well.

You received your law degree in 2009, and 12 years later you are the president of the ACBA. To what do you attribute such a quick rise?

I would attribute it to having good mentors and a good support system. I started at Pollock Begg my second year as a law student, and one of the partners started taking me to ACBA events. Being at those events gave my career a little fast-forward push. I ended up at a law firm that is pretty involved with the ACBA and encouraged me to have a presence.

In the early days as an associate, your time is typically spent worrying about accumulating billable hours and doing good work. Having a firm say that this organization is also worth your time has been a huge advantage. My peers did not have the time to serve on the committees, they had to focus on their law firm work.

What's on your agenda for your term? What do you hope to accomplish?

My agenda is in two categories, two overarching concepts I hope to address in my term. One is the fact we are coming out of a global pandemic that has affected every industry, including the practice of law. That calls to question, how do we as a trade organization stay relevant to lawyers that can be members?

People are now going to work from home in some capacity. How do we keep them engaged? The pandemic was an opportunity for senior lawyers to think about transitioning their practices and head into retirement. How do we stay relevant to them? There are a number of new lawyers who have done plenty of legal work but never truly stepped into a courtroom because they have been closed. A lot of members have challenges we have never seen before, and we need to react to those challenges.

The second compartment is allyship. I will plainly say to you that I am proud of my hard work and everything I have accomplished. I don't know if I were a female or a person of color that I would have the same rise. That's not disparaging the ACBA. As a white male, I have certain privileges and have not faced certain obstacles. My platform takes seriously the opportunity to bring attention to other white males that they have it easier. Yes, they still worked hard to get where they are, but it's been a little easier.

We have to amplify the other lawyers in our bar. We have very good ACBA groups that promote gender equality and opportunities for attorneys in minority communities like LGBT, Asian American and Black. I have some goals for myself, ways I want to supplement and support those groups and get them the recognition they deserve.

One of the challenges I gave our members is to do something on a small level. Ask your firm how to get more diversity. Take someone to coffee that doesn't look like you or is not on the same path as you and ask about them, get to know them. Make subtle, small steps that will get us to true equality for all.

What are the biggest challenges the Allegheny Bar faces right now?

Pittsburgh in and of itself isn't a diverse city, not as much as Philadelphia, New York and Washington. We have to be able to step outside the ACBA and work with the law schools and some of the community leaders and elected officials to talk about issues facing people of color in Pittsburgh and why it is not an attractive place for them to stay.

Your practice is family law. Why did you decide to focus on that area? Has that practice prepared you to take on this role?

In undergraduate school [at Bethany College], I was a psych major but never saw it as a transactional career. When I was in law school, I needed a job and Pollock Begg was hiring. When I went to interview, they asked if I was interested in family law, and I said, "Yes." To be honest, if they said maritime law, I would have said I was interested in that, too. Once I got into it, though, I did grow an appetite for it.

I like to represent people, not corporations. It's a lot of pressure, and people can be emotional, but I am really having a direct impact on people's lives. As a family law attorney, I am representing individuals going through very challenging times, and not one size fits all clients. Some see divorce as a business transaction, others see it as losing a part of their identity. I modify my approach to recognize the different goals and needs of each client.

I think I can say I will take the same approach as bar president. There are more than 5,000 members, and they are not going to have the same experiences, challenges and needs. I hope to use my skills to connect to these people and serve them best.

--Editing by Brian Baresch and Kelly Duncan.

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