

Wayne J. Lee, 63rd LSBA President

In His Own Words

An Interview with Wayne J. Lee, 63rd LSBA President

By James R. McClelland

On Friday, June 13, Wayne Joseph Lee will be sworn in as president of the Louisiana State Bar Association (LSBA). Other than being brave enough to accept this challenge on Friday the 13th, who is Wayne J. Lee? In an attempt to provide the answer to that question, Lee was interviewed at the offices of Stone Pigman Walther Wittmann, L.L.C., in New Orleans on the afternoon of March 18. The presidency of the LSBA will be in good hands and the future looks bright.

Lee graduated from Tulane Law School in 1974¹ and has spent his entire legal career at Stone Pigman.² He is, however, much more than a long-time member of a prestigious New Orleans law

firm. During his career, he has compiled an impressive résumé of public,³ civic⁴ and professional⁵ volunteer activities. He also happens to be an African-American and will be the first African-American lawyer to serve as president of the LSBA. Please learn more about Wayne J. Lee as told in his own words.

JRM: Wayne, the lawyers of Louisiana would like to learn a little about you since you are going to be their president starting June 13, 2003. Would you share a little of your family history with us, including something about your parents, your upbringing and where you grew up?

Photo by Lloyd
Dennis Photography
& Multi Media.

WJL: I was born in New Orleans in 1950. My parents, Robert Lee, Sr. and Mae Knox Lee, were born two days apart, went to high school together and were married for more than 50 years until my father's death three years ago. They both worked in the New Orleans public school system. My mother was an elementary school teacher who made sure that my brother, sister and I could read, tell time and do basic arithmetic even before kindergarten. After serving in the Marines, my father worked as a carpenter while working on his college degree. He then started as a high school math teacher and athletic coach and eventually became a high school principal. He was a tough but fair task master for us and the students at his schools. Both my parents believed that a good education was the most important gift that they could bestow, and made sure that my older brother, to my younger sister and I understand those values. We all finished college and obtained postgraduate degrees.

JRM: Wayne, I'm privileged to know your lovely wife, Pam. Would you tell us how you and Pam met, how long you've

been married, and something about your children?

WJL: Pam and I met while I was an undergraduate at Tulane. Her sister, Kathy, was a Newcomb student a year behind me. One of my best friends and classmates, Harold Sylvester, started dating Kathy. Pam would come on campus from time to time on the weekend to visit with Kathy and hang out with the other students. We started double dating with Harold and Kathy, who also married. Pam and I have been married now for 33 years. She has been my love and inspiration.

We have two kids. Wayne, Jr. is 32 and Jennifer is 27. Our kids are very different in their personalities, but they have always been supportive of each other. Wayne, Jr. has taken the more non-traditional career track, starting with working at the campus radio station in college and now working in the talent office for the House of Blues in New Orleans. Jennifer is an independent, focused young woman. She earned a degree in business at Emory University and went right to work. She married this past December and lives in Atlanta where she is

working on her master's in business administration. We are proud of both of them.

JRM: Wayne, you indicated that your parents were both educators. Would you tell us a little about your education, starting when you began school?

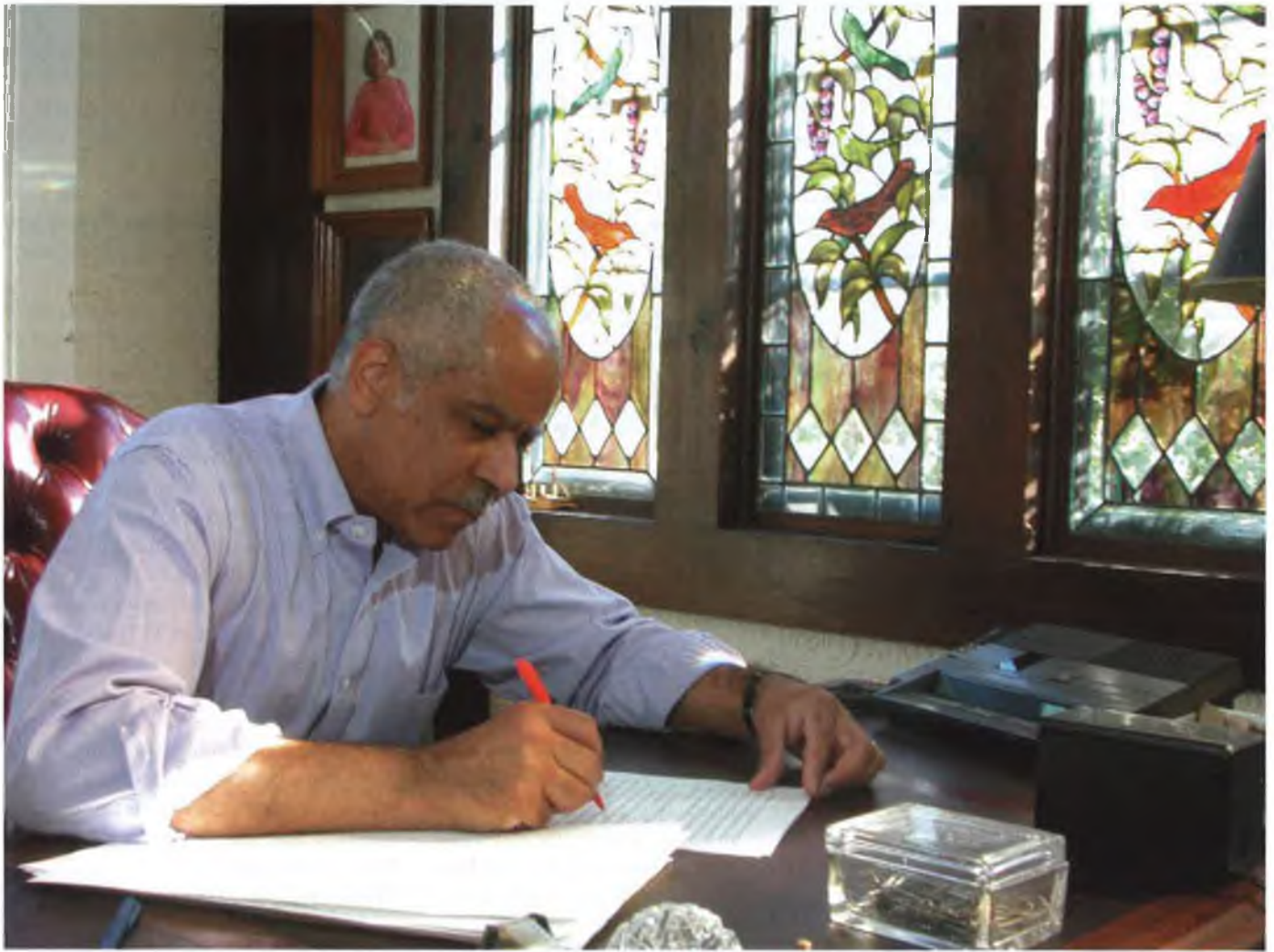
WJL: Not surprisingly, with two public school teacher parents, I started out in the New Orleans public school system. I attended elementary school at McDonough No. 6 which, to my dismay, was later converted to condominiums. I attended S.J. Green Junior High for one year and then spent five years at St. Augustine High School from eighth through 12th grade, graduating in 1967. I graduated from Tulane University with a political science degree in 1971 and Tulane Law School in 1974 — seven years in one place.

JRM: Wayne, would you tell us a little about your decision to become a lawyer, when you made it, how you came to that decision and tell us a little about your law school experience?

WJL: Jim, you know how some people



LSBA Secretary James R. McClelland, left, and LSBA President Wayne J. Lee. Photo by Michele C. Norris.



Wayne J. Lee, 63rd LSBA President. Photo by Lloyd Dennis Photography & Multi Media.

tell you that from the time that they were little kids, they knew they would be a lawyer. Well, I'm not one of them. When I started college, I hadn't a clue about what I wanted to do after college. In my junior year of college, I began to think about what I would do after graduation. I looked at the postings at the Tulane Placement Office to see what was available for someone with a political science degree and, frankly, I didn't like the options. I decided that I needed to consider a postgraduate degree. With Pam's encouragement, I applied to law school and was fortunate enough to be admitted to Tulane.

I must admit law school posed some challenges in addition to the usual stuff like getting adjusted to the Socratic method, new concepts and being graded on the basis of a single test per semester. At that point in time, the Tulane Law

School had only been integrated for a few years and the number of African-American students was dismally low. The six African-American students admitted in 1971 were the largest single-year admissions to that date. I believe that only four African-American students were in the next class. If nothing else, it gave us an extra incentive to bond and do well. One of the six African-American students died in an automobile accident before graduation, but none dropped out.

As it turns out, law school was a good match for me. I was fascinated by the courses and did well. Pam worked hard to help pay the bills and handle the babysitting and I mostly went to school and studied. Together, we made the *Law Review*. By the third year, like most of the other students, I was anxious to get out into practice.

JRM: Would you tell us about where you practice and the type of practice that you have?

WJL: I began work at the Stone, Pigman, Walther, Wittmann and Hutchinson law firm after my second year in law school. In 1973, during my second year of law school, I applied for summer clerkships with law firms in New Orleans, but without success. It just so happened that the editor in chief of the *Tulane Law Review* was going to work at Stone, Pigman and one of my law professors had clerked at Stone, Pigman as a student. They suggested that I apply to Stone, Pigman and put in a good word for me. I frankly had never heard of the firm before they made the suggestion. I applied and was hired for the summer. I liked the type of work that Stone, Pigman did, I liked the lawyers

and I guess they liked my work. At the end of the summer, I was offered a job as an associate which I accepted immediately.

When I started as an associate, Stone, Pigman was a firm of about 14 lawyers. The size gave me an opportunity to engage in practice with top flight lawyers who had a diverse practice, pride in the quality of their work and a strong sense of responsibility. It was large enough to handle some complex cases, but small enough that I was able to get some front-line experience. Over the years, I have had the opportunity to do a bit of everything, from small tort cases in the early years to larger cases, including antitrust cases, public utility regulation and, in more recent years, insurance litigation primarily involving class actions. The firm has grown and is currently about 50 lawyers, doing everything including tax, real estate, securities, trusts and estates, intellectual property, employment law and almost every type of litigation. I am proud to have been part of that growth.

JRM: Through the years, has the practice of law changed, Wayne?

WJL: The practice of law has definitely changed and for many reasons, some societal and some technological. I believe that the expectations and demands that are placed on lawyers are different from when I first started practice in part because technology makes things happen faster. There is an expectation that things can be immediately turned around and answers to problems should be available almost instantaneously. There is also a different sense of competition among lawyers. Lawyer advertising didn't exist when I first started. More pressure is placed upon lawyers to perhaps cut corners in order to get results regardless of how you get there, more pressure to have the end justify the means. In addition, as we have all become more mobile and businesses have grown, there has been a trend toward uniformity in the laws from state to state and a trend toward more multijurisdictional practice.

In many respects though, the basics are unchanged. Alternate dispute resolution is more prevalent, but the courts remain the quintessential institution for

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the administration of justice and the resolution of civil disputes. The rules of ethics still require lawyers to honor the confidences of their clients and refrain from placing the interests of the lawyer in conflict with the interests of the client. More than ever, there is a need to ensure the independence and integrity of the judicial system. Similarly, the recent events on Wall Street demonstrate how much our economy depends upon people having faith in the integrity of business transactions. In short, while the pressures lawyers face have increased, our responsibilities to clients, to the judicial system and to the rule of law remains constant. The law and the role of lawyers in society is as significant as ever.

JRM: Wayne, while in law school and initially beginning your practice of law, were you blessed with any mentors, and by that I mean people who guided you in the duties and responsibilities of a lawyer and how law should be practiced?

WJL: Absolutely, especially within the Stone Pigman firm. Phil Wittmann was and remains our senior litigation partner. I learned a lot from Phil about preparing cases for trial and about professionalism. He also encouraged me to become active in the bar association. Ewell Walther, a partner who died in

1990, was one of the smartest lawyers I've ever met. Ewell was primarily a transactional lawyer but seemed to have an almost encyclopedic familiarity with all areas of the law. He was usually the first lawyer to arrive and the last to leave the office. However, I was impressed as much by his commitment to fairness and to service in the community as I was by his commitment to quality legal work. The simple fact is I had quite a few mentors. I had the good fortune of coming to a firm comprised of highly talented lawyers who believed that quality performance and integrity are a lawyer's greatest assets. The doors were always open if I needed advice and they led by example as well.

JRM: Do you believe that it is important for established lawyers to be available and willing to act as mentors for lawyers just starting out?

WJL: I do think that lawyers have a responsibility to each other and to the system to make themselves available as mentors. The more experienced lawyers certainly played a role in my development as a lawyer. I can only imagine the challenges that are faced by young lawyers who have no one to turn to for advice. We should help other lawyers because it is the right thing to do. But it is also good for the profession. The entire profession gets a black eye when lawyers are unprofessional or unethical. We can help others avoid those problems, and help the image of all lawyers.

JRM: In addition to your many volunteer professional activities, you have volunteered your time and energy to many governmental and civic organizations. Wayne, how are you able to balance all of your governmental, civic and professional activities, practice law and still devote quality time to your family?

WJL: While the kids were growing up, we did the typical family vacations and I attended school plays, soccer games and the like. But, I am sure there have been times when I've not devoted as much quality time to family as I would have liked. I thank Pam for putting up with me over the years and adding her personal touch to everything family-related.

We host the family gatherings during the holidays and like to travel when we can.

JRM: Has your family always supported you in your activities, Wayne?

WJL: I think my family has always recognized that there are times when it is important to spend time on outside activities. I guess it goes back to examples I saw while growing up. When I was a kid, my father was a volunteer for the Red Cross. When hurricanes threatened, he was often stationed at Red Cross shelters. My parents and two of my aunts

tion. After I spent a couple of years learning about the practice of law, Phil encouraged me to get involved with the LSBA because it would be an avenue to meet and get to know other lawyers and to help the profession. He was right. I started out on the Continuing Legal Education Program Committee and have been working with LSBA committees and sections ever since.

JRM: Wayne, why did you seek the presidency of the LSBA?

WJL: Jim, that's a simple question, but

so. I was fortunate to be elected with the support of many friends and colleagues. I hope that, with their continued support, this will be a good year for the LSBA and a step toward increased diversity in the future.

JRM: Wayne, what advice would you give to a lawyer who is thinking about becoming a volunteer and getting involved in the LSBA?

WJL: My advice is simple — get involved. The LSBA has 27 committees and 25 sections. Service on committees gives you a chance to work with good lawyers and help the profession. Working in the sections helps to develop the areas of practice and professional development interests. In either case, there is no downside to getting involved. And, there are other opportunities. The Louisiana Center for Law and Civil Education (LCLCE) is affiliated with the LSBA and coordinates law-related education in the schools. Local pro bono projects provide means to provide legal services to the poor. The LSBA Web site has information on every committee and section as well as information on the LCLCE.

I hope that everyone who is interested in serving on committees lets us know, whether through the LSBA Web site or by letter to the Bar Center.

JRM: As you stated earlier, you are the first African-American attorney to be elected president of the LSBA. What are the perceptions of the public in general and lawyers in particular about the significance, expectations and responsibilities of the first African-American LSBA president?

WJL: I am not sure that I can accurately address the perceptions and expectations of others, but I can tell you what I think and what I have been told. There are some who optimistically expect major changes because of the fact that we have an African-American president of the Louisiana State Bar Association. I believe my election seems a significant event to others primarily because it is a first and thus uncommon. However, I hope that as we experience more diversity in the LSBA membership and lead-

Throughout the history of the LSBA, there has never been an African-American president. That is a disappointing statistic. At the same time, I don't know that any minority lawyer has ever run for the presidency. I thought about the civil rights slogan, "If not now, when?"

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were teachers in the public schools who put in countless hours beyond the classroom. One of my uncles worked full time with the post office but, over the years, found time to coach thousands of kids in youth recreational programs. And my wife, Pam, is no stranger to volunteerism. I think my family agrees that volunteer activities, both civic and professional, are important. In addition, those activities have given Pam and me the opportunity to meet a lot of good people who over the years have become friends. Being a part of something that makes a difference and making friends along the way are tremendous rewards.

JRM: Wayne, I'd like to talk to you about your volunteer professional activities. Why did you choose to become a LSBA volunteer and how did you first get involved with the LSBA?

WJL: Well, you asked earlier about my mentors. The first time I got involved in something for the LSBA, one of the partners, Phil Wittmann, encouraged me to do so. Phil has always been active in the profession and is the current president-elect of the New Orleans Bar Associa-

tion. After I spent a couple of years learning about the practice of law, Phil encouraged me to get involved with the LSBA because it would be an avenue to meet and get to know other lawyers and to help the profession. He was right. I started out on the Continuing Legal Education Program Committee and have been working with LSBA committees and sections ever since.

JRM: Wayne, why did you seek the presidency of the LSBA?

WJL: Jim, that's a simple question, but the answer is a little more complex. I decided to seek the presidency because I thought I could do a good job. I have spent a lot of time working with the bar over the years. I have chaired several committees, served on several other committees, including long-range planning committees, served in the House of Delegates and on the Board of Governors. I have worked with the LSBA staff and have an understanding of the bar association and its activities. In addition, I have served on the boards of several governmental entities, civic organizations and a large for-profit corporation. I frankly felt that I could bring some skills and experience to bear in my service as the LSBA president. But I had an additional reason for my decision to run for the presidency. Throughout the history of the LSBA, there has never been an African-American president. That is a disappointing statistic. At the same time, I don't know that any minority lawyer has ever run for the presidency. I thought about the civil rights slogan, "If not now, when?" It was time that someone ran and, with the support of the lawyers at Stone, Pigman, I was in a position to do

ership, the election of a minority president or a female president becomes a common event and the aura will diminish.

As far as expectations, I am sure they vary. I suspect there are some who expect me to be a president who will represent the interests of minority lawyers. And they are right — to a certain extent. I hope that the fact that I was elected president by the membership of the LSBA indicates that the membership is prepared for more diversity and expects that leadership in the association will be open to all. And, I hope that my service as president will encourage other minority lawyers to become more active in LSBA activities and assume leadership roles in the Association. The Louisiana State Bar Association has been an integrated bar since 1941, but there has never been an African-American or woman president. I hope it won't take this many years before another minority lawyer or a woman lawyer is elected president of the Association.

JRM: Wayne, what are your feelings about being the first African-American elected president of the LSBA?

WJL: I feel very honored to be elected. Indeed, I would feel honored even if I were not the first African-American president. I believe that increased diversity will benefit not only the minority lawyers but also the Association and the profession as a whole. I also recognize that I represent the entire bar association. I intend to do my best to work with the LSBA leadership and staff to ensure that the Association continues to thrive, continues to address its mission and maintains a solid financial condition.

JRM: What are your views as to the mission and responsibilities of the LSBA?

WJL: Well, the good thing about that question is that the bar association has a mission statement which was reaffirmed this year. The mission of the LSBA is to:

assist and serve its members in the practice of law, assure access to and aid in the administration of justice, assist the Supreme Court in the regulation of the practice of law,

uphold the honor of the courts and the profession, promote the professional competency of attorneys, increase public understanding of and respect of the law and encourage collegiality among its members.

It covers a lot but accurately states what we should be about as an association. This past October, we conducted a strategic planning session with lawyers, judges, law school professors from all around the state. We also conducted an Internet survey of our membership. We

I think that the profession is largely about order. Without laws, there is chaos. I think it is important that the profession work to assure that the law and the legal systems are understood and respected. The members of the profession collectively must do what they can to educate the public. . . .

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found that our members do believe that the mission statement accurately reflects what they consider the priorities of the Association and its members.

JRM: Wayne, in a somewhat related question, what are your views as to the roles and duties of the legal profession in general and lawyers in particular?

WJL: I think that the profession is largely about order. Without laws, there is chaos. I think it is important that the profession work to assure that the law and the legal systems are understood and respected. The members of the profession collectively must do what they can to educate the public and ensure the integrity of the legal system so that the system is trusted.

I believe that we, the individual lawyers, each have our part in that overall process. That means making sure that we interact properly with our clients, protect their interests, preserve the integrity of the attorney-client relationship, do not engage in conflicts of interest, and do not denigrate the legal system. By that, I mean we should not engage in untoward attacks against the judicial

process simply because we may disagree with a particular judicial decision. We need to show respect for the system as a whole and help maintain professionalism and ethics by example, by mentorship to young lawyers and students and by educating the public.

I also believe that lawyers owe something to their communities. Our education and training enable us to assist others and the community. Our license allows us to do things that lay persons can't. But I do want to note that, over the years, I have seen many lawyers

around this state donate their time, talent and dollars to improving the profession and their communities. While there is more that can be done, over all, I believe we can be proud of the contributions made by members of the LSBA.

JRM: What are your views as to the role and duties of the president of the LSBA?

WJL: The president of the LSBA is the spokesperson of the bar and the profession within the state of Louisiana. I believe the president of the association also has the responsibility of working with the staff and the other members of the bar association and the leadership of the bar association to help maintain the association on an even keel financially and on course in the pursuit of its mission. Lastly, I believe that the president has a responsibility to serve as a leader in identifying issues that are important to the Association and the profession and work to gather support from the membership and the public to address those issues.

JRM: Wayne, what are your goals as president of the LSBA?

WJL: My first goal is to make it through

the year with the Association still on a sound footing. We've had a series of excellent LSBA presidents. I hope to be able to follow in some of those footsteps and make sure that the programs that we put in place over the past years are strengthened, maintained, and, where possible, improved. Some examples are the Leadership LSBA program instituted by Larry Feldman, the law school orientation program introduced by Phelps Gay and the appellant opinion service implemented by Michael Rubin.

I also hope to use our available resources to address unmet needs. One of those areas includes efforts to increase the sense of connection with our membership, particularly the solo and small firm practitioners as well as the minority members of the bar. I plan to meet with the minority bar associations in an effort to improve the lines of communications, explore their concerns and provide an avenue for cooperative efforts. I hope to increase their participation in LSBA activities not only this year but in the future.

In addition, I would like to see us do more in the area of educating the public. We are thus working on some educational programs for the coming year in-

cluding a program about the 50-year anniversary of the Supreme Court decision in *Brown v. Board of Education*.

Over the years, we have seen more and more criticisms on the courts where the real complaint is a dissatisfaction with the result but pressure is made because of the lack of understanding about the process. I think it's important for the bar association to help to educate the press and the public about the distinctions between the two. I plan to appoint a committee to address the means to support the independence of the judiciary. I don't know what all the answers will be, but I think it is time the LSBA took a serious look at it. Lastly, we are facing a crisis in access to justice for the indigent, both in civil and criminal arenas. Work must continue to seek adequate funding for these basic needs.

JRM: How would you like your presidency to be remembered?

WJL: I would like my presidency to be remembered as a period during which there was an increased cooperation between the LSBA and all its members, and during which the missions of the LSBA were maintained and strengthened.

JRM: Wayne, when your time on earth is done, how would you like to be remembered by your family, friends and associates?

WJL: I try not to think about that very much. I try to do what I think is right and leave it to others to think whatever they may.

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Journal that there are differences of opinion among the members of the Bar regarding the manner in which Louisiana judges should be selected. Because the differences seem to be honestly and fervently held and because the selection of judges directly affects the character of the bench, the members of the Bar have a special interest and the differences deserve full hearing and discussion by the Louisiana State Bar Association. May I suggest that a committee be appointed to set an agenda for public oral and written debate and research, devoting, if necessary, a full issue of the *Journal* to the issues involved? If it is deemed appropriate after full examination of the issues, the association may consider a resolution voicing the views of the majority.

Marian Mayer Berkett
New Orleans

FOOTNOTES

1. Member of *Tulane Law Review* and Order of the Coif.

2. 1974-78, associate, Stone, Pigman, Walther, Wittmann & Hutchinson; 1978-02, partner, Stone, Pigman, Walther, Wittmann & Hutchinson; 2003-present, member, Stone Pigman Walther Wittmann, L.L.C.

3. Gubernatorial appointment to Louisiana Board of Regents, 1989-94, serving as secretary in 1993; mayoral appointment to Audubon Park Commission, 1978-84; Louisiana Supreme Court appointment to Louisiana Indigent Defense Board, 1994-97; legislative appointment to Louisiana Indigent Defense Assistance Board, 1998-03; and federal court appointment to Civil Justice Reform Act Advisory Group for the Eastern

District of Louisiana, 1995-98.

4. Archbishop's Community Appeal, volunteer, 1986-present, and Executive Committee, 1988-89; Audubon Institute, board member, 1988-94 and 1997-present; Bureau of Governmental Research, board member, 1991-97; Children's Bureau of New Orleans, board member, 1986-94; Greater New Orleans Educational Television Foundation, board member, 1993-95; Greater New Orleans Foundation, member of Grants Committee, 1988-90, board member, 1991-present, secretary, 1996, vice chair, 2000, and chair, 2001-03; Kingsley House, board member, 1987-2002, parliamentarian, 1989-91, vice president, 1992 and 1995-97, president, 1998-2000; St. George's Episcopal School, board member, 1988-91; Travelers Aid Society of New Orleans, board member, 1979-83; Tulane University, Paralegal Studies Advisory Committee member, 1985; Tulane University, President's Council, 1990-98; Tulane University Medical Center, Board of Governors, 1996-98; and Tulane Law School, Dean's Council, 1984-96 and 2002-present, and Advisory Board of Editors for *Tulane Law Review* Association, 2001-present.

5. Louisiana State Bar Association, president-elect, 2002-03; Board of Governors, 1993-96; House of Delegates, 1997-2002; House of Delegates Liaison to Board of Governors, 2000-01; Practice Assistance and Improvement Committee, member, 1997-2001, co-chair, 1997-98, and chair, 1998-99; Nominating Committee member, 1993; Continuing Legal Education Program Committee member, 1985-93; chair of Theme Seminar Subcommittee, 1987-89, vice chair, 1989-91, and chair, 1991-93; Mandatory Continuing Legal Education Committee Ad Hoc member, 1991-93, and Long-Range Planning Committee member, 1987-89, 1993 and 2002, chair, 2002.

Louisiana Bar Foundation, member, 2000-present, and board member, 2002; American Bar Association, House of Delegates, 2003-present; American Law Institute, member, 2002-present; American College of Trial Lawyers, Fellow, 1994-present; Attorneys Liability Assurance Society, Inc., board member, 2001-present; and Tulane Law School Inn of Court, member, 1988-present.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

James R. McClelland is secretary of the Louisiana State Bar Association and editor of the Louisiana Bar Journal. He is a partner of the Franklin firm of Aycock, Horne & Coleman. He is also an assistant district attorney for the 16th Judicial District. He received his BS degree in 1969 from Louisiana State University, his MBA degree in 1971 from Louisiana State University and his JD from LSU Paul M. Hebert Law Center in 1975. (519 Main St., Franklin, LA 70538)

