

BREAKING BARRIERS

First, But Not the Last*

Meet Michael H. Reed, the First Attorney of Color to Lead the Pennsylvania Bar Association as President

By Sean-Tamba Matthew, Esq.

I recently had the honor of interviewing Michael H. Reed, a Yale Law School graduate, a longtime partner (now special counsel) at Pepper Hamilton LLP and the first minority president of the Pennsylvania Bar Association. I hope the substance of our conversation will be an inspiration to all young attorneys and especially to young minority attorneys. *The transcript of our conversation has been edited due to space constraints.*

Why did you become an attorney?

I wanted to be an attorney since I was a young child. I didn't know any lawyers. I grew up in a working-class family in South Philly and was raised in the church by a very religious family, where I gained strong impressions of right and wrong. People in the church thought that I had the aptitude to pursue a career as a lawyer or minister.

What attracted you to Pepper and why did you spend your entire legal career there?

In 1970, James T. Giles of Pepper Hamilton & Sheetz interviewed me during my second year at Yale for a summer-clerkship job between my second and third years. James T. Giles graduated from Yale Law School in 1967 and later became a federal district court judge. After working at Pepper during the summer of 1971, I received an offer to come back as an associate. Over the years, I have

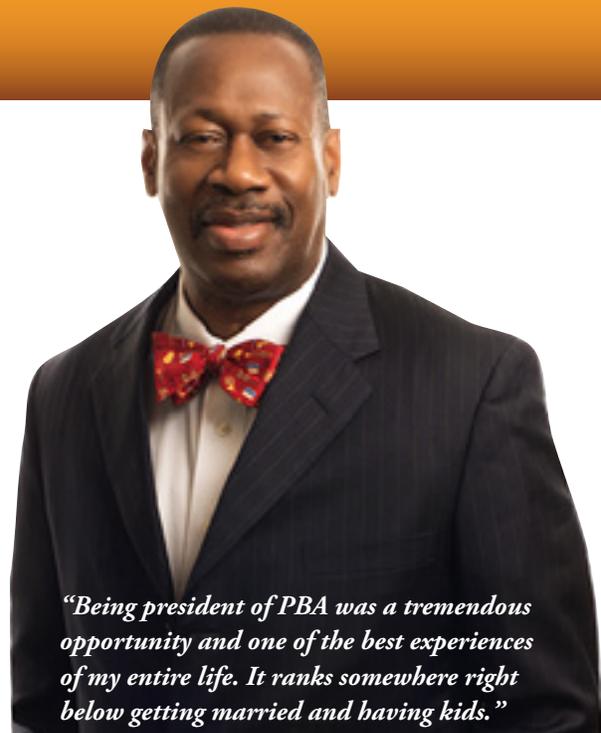
found the culture and values of Pepper compatible with my own.

Why did you decide to practice bankruptcy law?

I got into bankruptcy law totally by serendipity. I. Grant Irey, head of the business department, was my primary mentor. Five of us joined the firm in 1972. I got business, and others were sent elsewhere. It happened that Irey had an interest in bankruptcy law, which was considered esoteric and an area that large firms did not do. Bankruptcy was a specialty like trusts-and-estates law. The firm had some bankruptcy cases starting in my first year. However, in the late 1970s, Congress enacted a new bankruptcy law, and the practice exploded in volume.

You will receive the Higginbotham Lifetime Achievement Award at the PBA Minority Attorney Conference. What does this award mean to you and how does it rank among your many achievements?

Judge Higginbotham was one of my mentors. I met with him before I went to law school. At the time, he was a federal district court judge. He is one of the greatest legal minds in American history. I'm receiving an award named for one of my legal heroes and role models. His career should be used by young attorneys to model their careers. Many people believe that he should have sat on the U.S. Supreme Court.



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Why did you get involved in the PBA?

When I started practicing law it was common for the larger firms to encourage attorneys to belong to the local and state bar associations and the American Bar Association. Throughout most of my career my firm was willing to pay the dues for all of my bar memberships. As you know, the practices of the firms have changed. I have been active in bar associations during my entire career. In 1974, I was elected to serve on the executive committee of the Young Lawyers Section of Philadelphia Bar Association and also as first vice president of the Barristers' Association of Philadelphia. My involvement in the PBA came a little later. Early in my career I developed an interest in legal ethics: I began serving on the ethics committee of the PBA; I chaired the Philadelphia bar ethics committee in 1986. In 1987, I had a conversation with Joe Jones (then-PBA president) about the PBA becoming more connected with minority lawyers. As a result of that conversation and the subsequent actions of many people, the PBA Minority Bar Committee was formed. I later began serving in PBA leadership.

* A review of a contemporary minority person who breaks through to become the first in his or her field at an accomplishment.

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What were some of the highlights, low points in your experience as PBA president?

Being president of the PBA was a tremendous opportunity and one of the best experiences of my entire life. It ranks somewhere right below getting married and having kids. I had the opportunity to travel around this great commonwealth, which I think is a microcosm of America. One highlight was appointment of the Commission for Justice Initiatives in Pennsylvania (chaired by Ned Madeira of Pepper) and the various reforms it proposed, some of which were implemented. Presidents of bar associations are presented with unforeseen crises at least once or maybe more. I was no different. Dealing with challenges and crises can be a positive thing, although it doesn't always seem that way during the crisis. When I was PBA president I dealt with several unanticipated challenges. Like my predecessor, the late Tom Golden, I also dealt with tensions between the legal and medical professions.

What do you consider to be your greatest accomplishment as president of the PBA?

To be a living example of the importance of diversity. To help to highlight the importance of diversity and inclusion within the leadership of the PBA.

Your PBA presidential goals were to increase diversity and membership value. Has the PBA progressed with these goals?

I think the PBA has made significant progress on diversity and inclusion since I was president. The association has also



continued to provide membership value in a challenging environment for voluntary bar associations. As a voluntary bar association, the PBA has to earn the dues of its members. We

are basically running a business for our customers. If we fail to deliver value, we lose customers. The challenge for such organizations is that as large firms and other employers become less willing to pay for things like voluntary associations it is harder to retain members. Meeting the value proposition is a constant challenge.

What advice would you give to future presidents and leaders of the PBA?

Expect at least one challenge to arise during your presidency that was not on your radar. Be prepared to spend a lot of time and energy doing the job of the president, and try to have fun with it, too. It is appropriate for a future president to have one or two themes that they would like to focus on. But it is also important to remember that new presidents must collaborate with their predecessors and successors to be successful. Most programs/initiatives that are worthy require more than one year to accomplish.

Given the wide variety of professional development opportunities, why should young attorneys join the PBA and other bar associations?

New lawyers have an important stake in assuring that the legal profession will continue to play the important role in American society that it has played traditionally. I believe that the best way for lawyers to maintain the integrity, prestige, high standards and influence of the legal profession is through the work of the organized bar and public service.

Given your experience and the pressures of modern lawyering, what advice would you give young lawyers looking to develop an expertise in their practice?

You have to develop an interest in something that you like and do something extra in your area, like written contributions or participating in CLEs. I did not feel that I was truly an "expert" in my area until I taught several law school courses during the 1980s.

What is the value of mentoring for young attorneys and how should young attorneys seek out mentorship from more experienced attorneys?

My life is an example of the importance of mentorship. I would not have been able to accomplish what I have if I did not have important mentors throughout my career. Young attorneys should consider what their goals are and then seek out those in the field who have achieved success in that field. ♦



Sean-Tamba Matthew is an associate with Laura Solomon and Associates, where he forms and advises nonprofit, charitable and other tax-exempt organizations.

Sean is a member of the board of directors of Nutritional Development Services of the Archdiocese of Philadelphia and chairman of the school board of St. Raymond of Penafort, an Independence Mission School, in the West Oak Lane section of Philadelphia. He is also on the executive committee of the Young Friends of the Children's Scholarship Fund Philadelphia.