

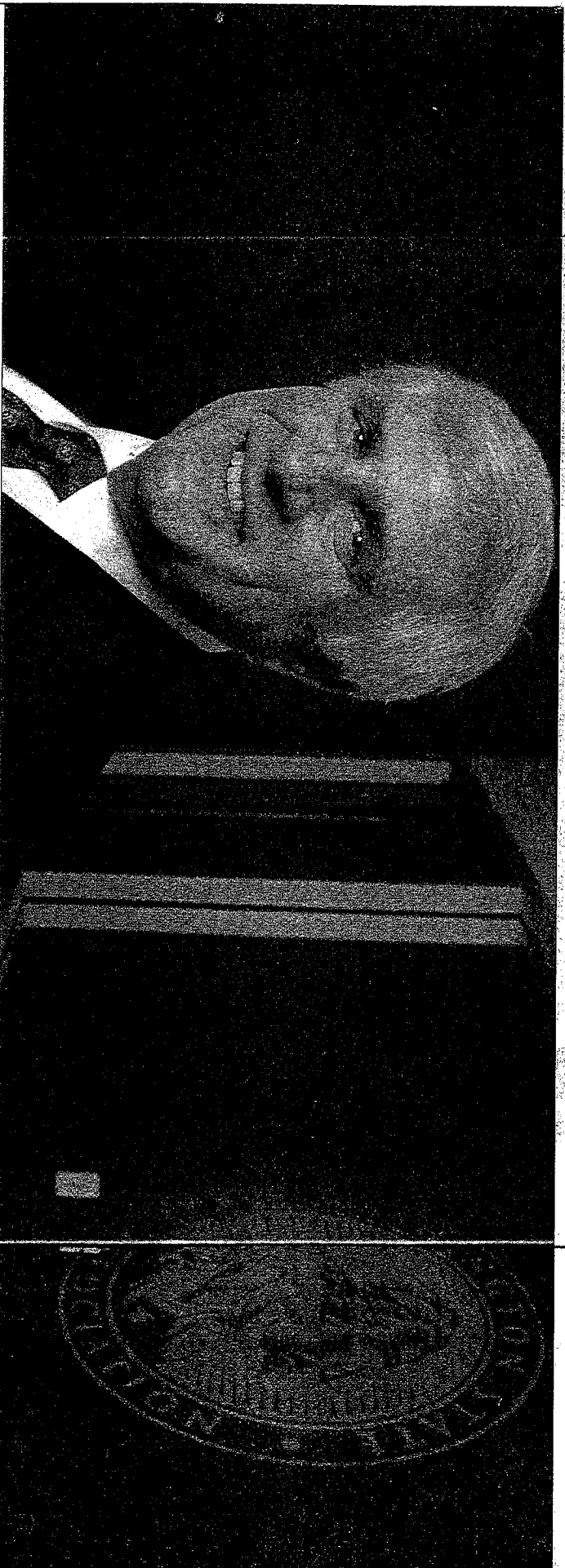
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PRESIDENT, WASHINGTON STATE BAR ASSOCIATION

QUESTIONS FOR | STEVEN TOOLE



BUSINESS JOURNAL PHOTO/Dan Schlander

Bellevue personal injury attorney Steven Toole is the new president of the Washington State Bar Association. Toole talks about a new legal aid program to assist people of moderate means, and how the bar association can assist struggling attorneys during economic hard times.

WHAT ARE YOUR PRIORITIES DURING YOUR YEARLONG TENURE AS PRESIDENT OF THE STATE BAR ASSOCIATION? We want to focus more — not exclusively, but more — on our existing members and programs and on implementing programs to improve the level of satisfaction our members have with their lives and the practice of law. There a lot of things we can do that will not only benefit our members, but also benefit the public and the justice system in general.

HOW HAS BAR ASSOCIATION MEMBERSHIP FARED DURING THE RECESSION? For the last couple of years we have told people that we have approximately 33,000 members. And now we are revising that to about 34,000. Whether it's increasing at the same rate, I don't really know, but it seems we have more and more attorneys and people graduating from

law school, not only with huge debt but with no job prospects. And that's been worse the last couple of years.

WHAT ARE YOU DOING TO HELP ATTORNEYS? There are programs that we are emphasizing, many of which are in existence. One is our Law Office Management Assistance Program. This is a low-cost service — it is designed to benefit solo and small-firm practitioners, maybe someone who is forced to throw up a shingle out of law school who doesn't really know how to run an office. The bar association does seminars around the state, visiting the smaller communities, (and) providing expertise.

YOU'RE ALSO PLANNING TO START A CONTACT WORK PROGRAM. WHAT IS THAT? It came about because of everything we read about law firms and corporations outsourcing work overseas.

We don't want to see our big law firms doing that same type of thing. We want to modify our website so that attorneys who are looking to do hourly contract attorney work — particularly if they are willing to do it at a discounted rate — can put that on their section of their webpage. Law firms looking to hire contract attorneys will be able to connect with them. I have been told by our IT department that this is relatively easy to get going with virtually no additional cost (and) that there is no reason that this shouldn't be able to be implemented before the year is out.

LAST YEAR THE BAR ASSOCIATION STARTED THE HOME FORECLOSURE LEGAL AID PROJECT FOR HOMEOWNERS WHO COULDN'T AFFORD AN ATTORNEY. WHAT ARE YOU DOING THIS YEAR? This year we are starting the moderate means program.

We always have the pro bono work, the efforts of the Northwest Justice Project and Columbia Legal Services to service the poor. But there's a great gap at 200 percent to 400 percent of the poverty level — people who have incomes but can't afford legal fees for legal problems. We are partnering with the law schools, starting with Seattle University. But the University of Washington is right around the corner, and then Gonzaga University (in Spokane)

will follow very shortly. We will have clinics at each of the law schools.

IS THIS AIMED AT PEOPLE IN NEED OF LEGAL HELP BECAUSE OF THE LINGERING EFFECTS OF THE RECESSION? We will go beyond just foreclosures. We will be able to assist people who are having domestic dispute problems, contract disputes, landlord-tenant disputes, debt-collection problems. We will have attorneys sign up to help these people in need. The difference between this program and the home-foreclosure program and the pro-bono work is there will be a fee charged of anywhere from \$50 to \$75 an hour. It will help our members in a couple of ways. Those who are struggling to succeed will have a way to get some business.

HOW DOES ALL THIS HELP WITH THE SATISFACTION ASPECT OF YOUR AGENDA? There are many, many lawyers who really do want to help the public and do good work serving others and using their background and education to assist people who need legal help who cannot afford it. You know how you feel good when you do a good act — it will clearly have that impact.

—Interview conducted and condensed by
GREG LAMM

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