



One of the adjectives mentioned more than once to describe Sara Austin by those who have worked with her is “driven.” Austin herself says, “That’s probably a fair word. I think I’m pretty far up on that Type-A scale. I’m not good at sitting still.” PBA members will have an opportunity to see for themselves. Austin takes over the PBA presidency for 2016-17 at the association’s annual meeting the second week of May.

There’s certainly not much sitting-still in the cards for Austin, given that she’s combining her year as bar president with keeping her busy practice going as usual. Did we mention that she’s a solo practitioner? And also chair-elect of the PBA Solo and Small Firm Practice Section? And that even with a heavy résumé of bar activities in the recent past, she manages to rack

up 1,400 to 1,500 billable hours per year? And find time to go scuba diving?

“You make it work, you just make it work,” she says. “Juggling is not a good word, but fitting everything in, that’s important. Thank goodness for mobile technology.”

Originally from Richmond, Va., Austin was once an aspiring geologist at the University of Virginia but decided she didn’t want a career “digging in the dirt.” She’d been interested in law and involved in handling student issues in high school. Out of that the idea of litigation “started to seem attractive” as a career option. She graduated from UVA in 1987 with a degree in sociology and went on to law school at William & Mary, graduating in 1990.

After law school, she clerked for a federal bankruptcy judge in Virginia. At the time, she had a friend who hailed from York.

# DRIVEN TO LEAD

## Profile of Incoming PBA President Sara Austin

By Don Sarvey

That's how she got acquainted with the area. She liked the rhythm of life in York and decided to relocate. She joined a succession of York firms, first as an associate handling bankruptcy matters and later as a partner also handling labor-and-employment issues. "I don't think I could ever live in a big city. I've always known that," she says. "A big city means a lot of people all the time — you're 'on' all the time. That's great for some, just not me."

In the fall of 2004, she decided it was time to start her own firm. "I enjoy being able to decide which cases I want and which I don't, more so than within the strictures of [somebody else's] firm. I set the firm culture, the expectations of the firm."

Austin has a nonlawyer assistant and occasionally contracts assignments to an outside lawyer. But most of the time she is the focal point of responsibility, and it prompts one to ask: Is that difficult or is that good for her? "Both," she replies. "At times it's certainly difficult because legal work that requires a lawyer can't get done by anyone but me. By the same token it's good because I'm not worrying about another attorney's work and how things are getting done and how they're dealing with things."

She adds with emphasis: "There's one thing that holds true. I really want to do a good

job serving the client. There are certain business aspects to the law, but it still really is a professional career where you want to provide good service to the client."

Her notion of professionalism is well defined: "It's about being able to represent the client, their interests, [within] the adversarial system, but the 'nice' adversarial system. I mean that you don't have to be nasty or ugly or anything like that. You can argue your case for your client and still be nice, still shake hands, go to lunch with your opposing counsel, things like that."

Austin's bar-career ladder has a lot of rungs. She has already been president of the York County Bar Association (YCBA), in 2006. She's currently treasurer of the PBA Commission on Women in the Profession. She's a Pennsylvania delegate to the American Bar Association House of Delegates. She's a veteran of the PBA Board of Governors. She's a past president of the Pennsylvania Bar Institute (PBI). She's a past chair of the PBA Bylaws Committee. She has had a hand in the development of the PBA Strategic Plan. She's a life fellow of the Pennsylvania Bar Foundation. She's a past president of the Middle District Bankruptcy Bar Association. And, among still other things, she's an adjunct professor at Widener University Commonwealth Law School in Harrisburg.



Austin on a site visit to the island of St. Kitts, planned location of the 2017 Midyear Meeting



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Austin's working style has accumulated admirers. "It was great working closely with her," says Victoria Connor, CEO of the YCBA, who was new to her job when Austin served as president. "She was invaluable to me as a newbie. She helped me learn the ropes of the bar association world."

Angela Edris, a program attorney at PBI, calls Austin a "bar association all-star" and says her enthusiasm is "unmatched and definitely contagious." Dan Betancourt, who has worked with Austin in his role as CEO of the Community First Fund economic-development organization in York, sees in her "a passion for helping aspiring entrepreneurs" and others in the community. Sally Conlin, office manager for Community Asset Management, a property-management company in York for which Austin has done legal work, says Austin has "impeccable communication skills" and "simply takes care of things."

Austin's theme for her year as PBA president is "Dive Right In," derived from her avocation, scuba diving. Jeff Shlaline, her husband of nearly 18 years and proprietor of the Scuba Central PA dive shop in York, introduced her to diving on a trip to Aruba. She got her diver certification in 2004 and diving-instructor certification in 2011. She and her husband make diving trips frequently. She enjoys the focus she experiences while diving. "You concentrate

on what you're doing," she says. "Whatever is going on, on the surface, you get to forget about it."

Austin says she has "no specific, single-year projects" on her to-do list as PBA president. Rather, she intends to work in concert with the strategic plan that the association put in place last year. The plan is a "skeleton" for what needs to be done, she says, and in general she will look to "keeping our resources, both human and financial, focused on our members."

She says the PBA is planning a survey to help identify what benefits members want or need most. She wants to keep improving working relationships with local and affinity bar associations and work more closely with the Pennsylvania Bar Foundation. The pursuit of financial stability is definitely on the radar. "The PBA is an engine that needs to keep running to serve the members and, of course, that engine needs to be fed," she says. It's clear, though, that "dues revenue alone isn't enough to support the organization" in an era of competing demands. Dues-paying memberships are declining. "That's not just the PBA. It's just happening. So many people are being asked to do so many things. I don't think anybody anywhere has figured that out." One implication is the necessity of exploring options for non-dues revenue. Austin believes "the sky is the limit [for non-dues revenue] ... we just need to find out how to get to that sky." ☞



Don Sarvey is editorial director of *The Pennsylvania Lawyer* magazine.

Interview photos by Cindy Barger, [www.perfect-images-photography.com](http://www.perfect-images-photography.com).

The PBA Strategic Plan is on the PBA website. On the home page at [www.pabar.org](http://www.pabar.org), click on the "About the PBA" link at upper left to reach the landing page where the plan and other basic association information is posted.

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