

Blooming by the Border

Susquehanna County solo practitioner Frank O'Connor is the new PBA president

By Don Sarvey



If you ask Frank O'Connor how he wound up becoming the only lawyer in the out-of-the-way community of Great Bend in Susquehanna County, he makes a joke: “The car broke down.”

At the conclusion of the annual meeting on May 16, Francis X. O'Connor will become the new president of the Pennsylvania Bar Association — the only president ever to come from rural Susquehanna County, population just slightly north of 43,300.

O'Connor grew up in Tonawanda, N.Y., near Niagara Falls, the second of six children, son of a chemical engineer and a stay-at-home mom educated as a nurse. He went to high school in Buffalo, graduated from the University of Scranton — “that’s what brought me to Pennsylvania” — and then went to the Saint Louis University School of Law. He had fully intended to become a teacher after college, but teaching jobs were scarce at the time due to the competition for Vietnam War deferments. Anyway, after studying history at the University of Scranton, there was something about the law that seemed like a natural fit, he explains. “I thought it was something I could do.”

O'Connor landed his first job in law practice with a firm in Binghamton, N.Y. There he might have built his career, but the firm lost one of its major clients and he was let go. Trying to decide what to do, he went around talking to colleagues. He asked an interesting question: What was their greatest regret? The answer: They regretted never having tried to make it in practice on their own.

He started scouting locales where he could set up a practice and went looking in Montrose, the county seat of Susquehanna County. It had only 11 lawyers at the time, but, in his words, he found the local bar “somewhat closed.” One evening in October, he got off I-81 and stopped in Great Bend, a hair’s breadth from the Pennsylvania-New York state line. He liked what he saw. “There was some activity there; there was a stop light, one of five in the county; there was one bank and another being built. I thought there might be some prospects there.” It certainly had need. The town had no lawyers in residence.

O'Connor rented a small office on Main Street in the center of town (a town that even today has a population of fewer than

Francis X. O'Connor of
Susquehanna County,
120th president of
the Pennsylvania
Bar Association





The O'Connors,
Sharon and Frank



800 people). He never intended to stay longer than two years, but, well, things happen. After opening his office in Great Bend, O'Connor met a lady named Sharon in an elevator in Binghamton. They got married and had three children: daughter Mary Elizabeth, now 32, a non-practicing lawyer who lives outside Boston, and sons John Francis, 29, and Brian William, 26, both of whom live in the Great Bend area.



O'Connor has come up through the ranks to the PBA presidency. He served on the PBA Board of Governors and was Zone 5 governor representing Bradford, Lackawanna, Luzerne, Monroe, Pike, Sullivan, Susquehanna, Wayne and Wyoming counties from 2003 to 2007. He served as PBA treasurer from 2008 to 2011. He is a past chair of the PBA Membership Development Committee and a past president of the PBA Conference of County Bar Leaders. He was a member for six years of the Disciplinary Board of the Supreme Court of Pennsylvania and served as its vice chair. He belongs to the council of the PBA Solo and Small Firm Practice Section and is vice president of the Susquehanna County Bar Association, a post he's had for years. Not surprisingly, he has a list of community affiliations ranging from scouting and church to the local ambulance company.

Former PBA President C. Dale McClain of Montgomery County, a friend of O'Connor's through the Solo and Small Firm Practice Section, describes O'Connor the lawyer as "very cautious, hardworking and well prepared." McClain describes O'Connor the man as "a family man first, conservative, honest and religious." Being from a rural county will not be a hindrance, McClain says. "Frank is very aware of life in the big city."

Another friend from the Solo and Small Firm Practice Section is Marion Laffey-Ferry of Butler County. "Frank is one of a vanishing breed — the true general practitioner," she says. Because of that, she adds, he "has always been most appreciative of what membership in the association provides to each and every lawyer who wishes to take advantage of it." Laffey-Ferry puts boosting membership in the association as the top challenge facing O'Connor in his year as president.



There's no easy answer to dealing with membership, O'Connor says when asked about it. If only non-members could see the benefits through his experience. He routinely sees the PBA as an efficient way to connect with other lawyers all over the state — lawyers who can offer a wealth of advice, suggestions and points of view and even serve as a sounding board in ways that are helpful to colleagues, especially to solo and small-firm colleagues. "If you have a question, you can pop it on a listserv and get other lawyers from throughout the state to chime in on it," he says. "I have found that if I have a theory of law that I haven't addressed before, I know people throughout the commonwealth that I can call up that are experts in their fields. That's an advantage that the association gives us."

Tangential to the issue of membership, O'Connor wants the PBA to stay away from what he calls "statement positions," which he explains as taking formal positions on social and political issues that don't directly relate to protecting or improving the ability of lawyers to practice law and serve their clients. Venturing into this area, he believes, is "beyond the scope" of the association and can cost rather than gain members. "We as an association should not tell people what their political or social or religious views should be because that does not affect the lives of lawyers. It may affect us personally, but it doesn't affect our practice of law." He adds, "I believe our association should be concerned with making the lives of lawyers more enjoyable, more relaxing, more satisfying, more financially rewarding."

One new program that he would like to see instituted involves providing wills for veterans on a pro bono basis. O'Connor remembers when returning Vietnam veterans were scorned. Today's vets are getting the proper respect, he says, and providing wills at reduced or no cost is one way to say thank you. "When people take time out of their lives to serve their country they should be thanked for it." This program is close to his heart because his younger son,

Brian, is a lieutenant in the Army National Guard.



If you ask Frank O'Connor what the highlight of his legal career has been up to this point, he will say it was his service on the Disciplinary Board. "I had the great honor to serve two terms on the Disciplinary Board of the Supreme Court. It was a board where you felt you really made a difference. The lawyers that serve on that board, almost to a person, work harder than anybody I've ever seen to try and get it right. The goal of everybody was: Let's do the right thing."



All of a sudden, 39 years slipped by and O'Connor's two-year limit in Great Bend is dusty history. Now he has a track record as a successful and enthusiastic solo practitioner. He doesn't have any regrets about his choice to go solo. "I've never had a day when I haven't enjoyed practicing law," he says. Would he have been just as happy in a large firm? "Who knows?" he says. But he never minded the built-in burden of the solo. "You're independent. You don't have to answer to other people, but if something goes wrong, your name is the one on the door."

He's about to take on one more burden: He's putting his name on the door in a different way by leading the PBA. He knows his practice is going to take a hit because of the duties of the office, but with retirement not too far off (he's 65 and defines retirement as a 15- to 20-hour work week), he doesn't seem to mind. His ambition is to leave the PBA "a little



bit better" than he found it. His friend, Marion Laffey-Ferry, has no doubt that O'Connor will walk the "tightrope" of the job as well as anybody who's had it. "As a person, Frank is more complex than people perceive," she confides. "He is dedicated and committed to his family, his church, his clients and his peers. What some may not know is that Frank knows how to have fun and really enjoys socializing. A beer, a glass of good wine or a Jameson is not outside his experience." ☞



Don Sarvey is editorial director of this magazine.

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