

ALUMNI

PROFILES



Serving the state, the nation and the world



J. COLE PORTIS: SERVING THE STATE

BY MONIQUE FIELDS

J Cole Portis ('90), the 141st President of the Alabama State Bar, embraces the story of the good Samaritan and has crafted a plan to serve lawyers and the public as his neighbor.

• Portis, Principal and Section Head of the Product Liability/ Personal Injury section for Beasley Allen in Montgomery, is using his 13-month tenure to serve the profession and the state, initiating programs that will help lawyers become more effective, attract more lawyers to the profession and, ultimately, advise the state leaders on some of its most pressing issues.

He is opening the lines of communication and visiting more than 60 local bar associations so that he and others can listen to what members want and need. He is inviting leaders of those associations to Montgomery for conversations about what's happening within the bar. To supplement those meetings, he helped develop a portal that lawyers can access through alabar.org so that any member can offer suggestions about benefits and address other bar matters.

"Listen, this is your bar," he told members at the Alabama State Bar Annual Meeting & Legal Expo in June. "We need to listen to you. We need to pay attention to you, and we need to serve you."

Portis is familiar with service. He is the father of nine children ages 6 to 22. Portis and his wife, Joy, adopted six of their children and are strong advocates for adoption. They founded Love 100 Ministry, which assists Alabama families with adoption costs, and have fostered many children.

"I don't know that everyone is called to be a foster parent, but I would say everyone is called to ensure that children in Alabama who are in our foster care system are taken care of," he said. "I think we all have that responsibility."

Portis's calling to serve resonates throughout his practice. He represents those who have lost someone or have been injured. While he knows that legal professionals are often referred to as lawyers and attorneys, he said he feels like he is a "counselor of law," someone who counsels individuals through their grief.

Portis and his staff have successfully handled more than 100 cases that were tried or resolved for more than \$1 million, and he was nominated, along with his colleagues, for the 2014 Public Justice Trial Lawyer of the Year Award for leading the first lawsuit to go to trial against Toyota. That case linked sudden unintended acceleration to electronic throttle control problems.

"He's a very successful lawyer at trial, but he's also successful in managing an entire section with over 14 lawyers and approximately 30 support staff: the Product Liability/Personal Injury section," said Thomas J. Methvin, principal and managing attorney at Beasley Allen. "That's been the bread and butter section since we were founded in 1979."

Helping others is also the common thread running through Portis's Alabama State Bar agenda. While the Alabama Bar has the Alabama Lawyer Assistance Program, which provides help to lawyers, judges and law students who are addicted and have mental health disorders, Portis is starting a wellness initiative that will help lawyers take care of themselves before concerns become problems. The initiative will primarily deal with mind, body and spirit, and provide resources for stress, nutrition and faith.

He is focusing on the practice of law and is designing a program that will help lawyers tap into educational opportunities involved in the practice of law as well as new areas of law. With technology evolving on a daily basis, Portis wants to show lawyers what technology is available to help them in their practice and introduce them to emerging technology. He notes that lawyers do not go to school to learn how to run businesses, but law offices

are businesses. To help lawyers become more efficient, he wants the Alabama State Bar to provide lawyers with the tools for running effective businesses, including foundational principles and marketing.

Portis asked Monet Gaines, assistant attorney general in the Opinions Division, to be his vice president, and she didn't hesitate to help him accomplish his goals.

Gaines has agreed to help Portis increase interest in the legal profession and boost minority participation in the bar. The bar has a successful program aimed at attracting high school students, and Portis would like to promote becoming a lawyer to college students, emphasizing there are several roads they can take that end at the same destination.

"He really seeks to make a difference in everything that he does, not just this," Gaines said. "He really has a heart toward service. Listening to what he's passionate about is just exciting to me."

Under his leadership, the Alabama State Bar also will promote the legal profession by advocating for the public and volunteering to represent those who cannot afford legal representation, increase foster care among lawyers and issue a call to all lawyers to be engaged in public service, including the Alabama Legislature, because lawyers understand how to be analytical and solve problems.

Those who know Portis say he will accomplish all of his goals in 13 short months. Colleagues and friends describe him as someone who is calm, someone who lives what he believes.

"There's no doubt in my mind that he's going to do it," said Cooper Shattuck, a


State Bar Commissioner and General Counsel for The University of Alabama System. "He won't do it on his own. He will enlist help because he's a magnet for people who want to be productive, people who want to accomplish things."

Portis's goals have been decades in the making. He has fond memories of

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law school because that is where he formed many relationships that mean so much to him. It has been those same relationships that have spurred him on in his practice. He vividly remembers attending UA Law during his first year and sitting in Professor Harry Cohen's class. He remembers not being as prepared as he should have been and knowing Cohen would call on him to see what he knew about a case. He also remembers knowing he was "was going to completely flub it."

"Going from an insecure student with very little knowledge and then to be able to practice at Beasley Allen and really have the opportunity to handle some landmark cases and to be in leadership positions is just — I guess this is a word — unfathomable," he said. "It just doesn't make any sense to me. God has blessed me richly." 



Portis ('90) serves as the 141st President of the Alabama State Bar.