

NEW JERSEY LAWYER

Greenbaum to head Federal Bar

Recruiting young lawyers a goal

By Dana E. Sullivan

It wouldn't be a bad idea for ambitious young lawyers to follow the career path of the incoming president of the Association of the Federal Bar of New Jersey.

After all, Jeffrey J. Greenbaum's record of winning cases is no accident.

He says his extra edge comes from being involved in bar associations, not just because it's the right thing to do as a member of the legal community, but it's useful for sharpening skills and networking.



Jeffrey J. Greenbaum

Those young lawyers are the people Greenbaum wants to recruit. The Federal Bar is a great group, he said, "but it's getting older and grayer."

As president, Greenbaum said he'll also keep plugging for the association's basic issues, such as preservation of the attorney-client privilege (under siege in federal corporate investigations), promotion of judicial independence and raises for federal judges, and a focus on

the association weighing in on proposed court rule changes.

He'll also strive to keep the federal group current on e-discovery, which lawyers in both state and federal courts must master.

"Either they can learn it the easy way by rolling up their sleeves and doing it, or the hard way" as a deadline closes in.

He recently had a two-hour negotiation with a plaintiff lawyer over how they would manage electronic documents.

"Such a conversation would have been foreign to most people just a few years ago," he noted.

Greenbaum, chairman of the class-action practice group at Sills Cummis Epstein and Gross in Newark, will take office Thursday.

Reared in New York, he attended the Wharton School of Business expecting he eventually would enter the family business. But while in law school at the University of Michigan, he became excited about practicing law for its own sake.

After clerking for U.S. District Judge Frederick B. Lacey, he became an assistant U.S. attorney in the consumer fraud unit in Newark, and tackled mail fraud cases.

When it was time to enter private practice, he thought, "This New Jersey seems like a pretty good place to practice" and was recruited immediately by Clive S. Cummis, becoming the 20th lawyer in a firm that now has more than 170.

Business bent

Combining his business training with law skills, he became proficient in class-action defense. He found that by getting involved in the organized bar and court committees, he could ratchet up his knowledge at a pace he otherwise might not have been able to achieve.

"It helps build credentials, and get skills and expertise, and give back to the profession," he said.

A sampling of the committees he's served on includes the American Bar Association's Litigation Section, where he's been an officer and its liaison to the U.S. Judicial Conference Advisory Committee on Civil Rules, and a member of the section's committee to review court rules designed to mesh with the Class Action Fairness Act.

His major ABA role now is the mundane, but massive, assignment as revenue officer for the ABA's Litigation Section, raising money to keep the 70,000-member unit functioning.

He's also been active in the New Jersey State Bar Association, where he's founder and co-chairman of the Class Actions Committee.

Working in state and federal courts, Greenbaum also has offered his services to the New Jersey Supreme Court; he now is a member of its Civil Practice Committee.

Money from Marcos

Greenbaum's once-in-a-lifetime case was his representation of the government of the Philippines in its attempt to recoup money the Marcos family had diverted to real estate in the United States.

It was a chance to "wear a white hat" and go after money looted from a country that really needed it.

It started with several residential properties in New Jersey and once those cases were won, he turned to New York where the Marcos family had four buildings.

But the family and mortgage holders had their lawyers, too — more than a half-dozen from top New York firms.

In the end, millions of dollars went back to the Philippines' treasury, dedicated to land reform.

"It was satisfying to go up against that kind of legal talent and win," Greenbaum said.

And all along, he's been winning cases for a wide range of clients that includes banks, investment houses, electronics companies, hospitals, pharmaceuticals and a web-hosting business.

"Clients like results. It keeps them coming back," he said.

Opponents' respect

Along the way, those who have faced him in the courtroom have found him an affable but formidable opponent.

Frederic K. Becker of Wilentz, Goldman & Spitzer in Woodbridge, who faced him in a lengthy trial, called Greenbaum "terrific, a very capable trial attorney," adding, "I have the highest regard for him."

Andrew R. Wolf of Galex Wolf in North Brunswick has had at least five cases against Greenbaum and considers him a model for lawyers.

For Wolf, Greenbaum's civility and demeanor don't just make for good feelings, they also keep the issues clear and help get cases resolved more efficiently.

"He advocates vigorously for his client; that's expected," Wolf said. "But if every attorney in the state worked the way he does, we'd have a better court system."

Michael S. Meisel of Cole Schotz Meisel Forman & Leonard in Hackensack said he's spent many hours with Greenbaum, not only as an adversary, but as a collaborator on the court's Civil Practice Committee.

"He is really passionate about improving civil practice," Meisel said. In the courtroom, "he's a litigator who stands by his guns, who prepares and presents his case meticulously."

Such praise from opponents may be enough to make Greenbaum blush, but he does say that grandstanding has no business in negotiations or the courtroom.

According to him, "Extra histrionics never get anybody anywhere."

Avoids politics

As a class-action defense lawyer during an era when plaintiffs lawyers have been political targets, Greenbaum steers clear of the rhetoric of those who claim the courts are clogged by baseless suits and those who believe any tort reform is a corporate conspiracy to victimize the public and consumers.

While he did participate in the ABA committee that worked on court rules around the Class Action Fairness Act, he shuns political debates.

"Plaintiff or defense, political persuasion, who your clients are — none of it matters when tackling these issues. The only thing that matters is what's best for the practice of law."

Other officers are Dennis J. Drasco, president-elect; Ronny J.G. Siegal, first vice president; John P. Lacey, second vice president; Paul J. Fishman, secretary; and Lisa J. Rodriguez, treasurer.

Comments about this story may be sent to dana.sullivan@njlnews.com.