

Memphis Attorneys Take Helm of State Organizations

By LANCE ALLAN

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Saturday marks the start of “the year of Memphis” with regard to the Tennessee legal community – Memphis attorneys will assume the presidencies of two statewide law associations.

Local control. Bill Haltom, a partner with Thomason, Hendrix, Harvey, Johnson & Mitchell PLLC, becomes president of the Tennessee Bar Association, and Linda Warren Seely, a director with Memphis Area Legal Services, takes over as president of the Tennessee Lawyers’ Association for Women.

“I’m very excited,” Haltom said of the opportunity to serve fellow attorneys in his new role. “I’m a first-generation lawyer, and I’m proud to be a lawyer. I grew up being inspired by fictional lawyers like Perry Mason and Atticus Finch, and I see this as an opportunity to help serve a profession that has been very good to me and a profession I think is very important to this country.”

Seely, who became involved in TLAW 10 years ago, has served as president of the local chapter, based in Jackson, Tenn. She said the association has given her a chance to give back to the profession.

“My involvement in TLAW has given me some wonderful opportunities to develop leadership skills,” she said. “It has also given me the opportunity to network with other women attorneys across the state that I felt was very beneficial to my career.”

Coinciding with an annual convention, leadership of the associations rotates between each of the three Grand Divisions of the state. The year of West Tennessee begins with the conclusion of this week’s convention in Knoxville. The 2006 convention will be held in Memphis at The Peabody.

Improving perception. This week’s kickoff marks the start of an important year for attorneys across the state as the TBA shifts its focus to improving the public image and perception of the legal community. Haltom’s theme for the year is “Stand Up and Deliver.”

“By that I mean I believe that Tennessee lawyers need to stand up for the American legal system and that we need also to deliver by not just talking about our great system, but by living it out in our daily practice,” Haltom said. “In terms of ‘Stand Up,’ the American legal system is under attack now. It’s under attack by some politicians, it’s under attack by some aspects of the media and under attack by the culture in that there are people and groups out there that want to restrict people’s access to the courts, who don’t have confidence in our jury system.

“The reason I’m concerned about that is that really, when you start attacking the jury system, you’re attacking the foundation of democracy because what you’re saying is we don’t trust 12 people from the community to come and fairly resolve a dispute. I think when you say that, you’re on a slippery slope. The American rule of law and access to justice is what makes America America.”

Working together. The two associations also will mark the beginning of a year of partnership as they work together to improve public trust and confidence in the legal system.

“What I had noticed was that TLAW and TBA didn’t necessarily work hand-in-hand when it came to joint initiatives,” Seely said. “I’ve been in conversation with Bill Haltom for the past year or so to talk about what TLAW and TBA can do jointly. Both Bill and I have a lot of concerns about public trust and confidence in the legal system and in lawyers.”

The TBA’s “Stand Up” theme also is meant to recruit attorneys for community education programs, such as going into schools and senior centers to talk about the law and people’s rights and responsibilities, Seely said. The “Deliver” part of the theme is designed to encourage attorneys to sit down in their own communities to figure out what the legal needs are and what attorneys and bar associations can do to meet those needs.

Haltom said it’s important that the groups work together to meet those goals.

“We are going to have a joint project on the ‘Deliver’ part of this, the Access to Justice System Project,” he said. “That is developing a statewide program to provide for more pro bono opportunities of services for lawyers across the state. Lawyers across Tennessee are already devoting thousands of hours to pro bono. But we would like to harness those efforts into more organized efforts by the bar.”

Boon for Memphis. While local leadership for the next year offers a boost for West Tennessee attorneys, Seely said an additional boost for the area will be the impact of the TBA convention in Downtown Memphis next summer.

“The biggest advantage is the annual conference is held in that particular region,” she said. “You have the Tennessee Judicial Conference, the Tennessee Trial Lawyers, the Tennessee Bar Association and the Tennessee Lawyers’ Association for Women, we all have a large joint conference.”

Box:

Tennessee Bar Association

124th Annual Convention

When: June 15-18

Where: Knoxville Marriott

Basics: Concludes June 18 with the induction of local attorneys Bill Haltom as president of the TBA and Linda Warren-Seely as president of the Tennessee Lawyers’ Association for Women.

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