Bar Prez Plans Year of Service

By Andy Meek

During this month’s annual meeting of the Memphis Bar Association, the gavel was passed to a new president who pushed for his colleagues to take summer interns at their firms.

It’s part of a community-minded spirit that private attorney Ricky Wilkins made a theme of his just-ended tenure as the MBA president. And Shuttleworth Williams PLLC partner John Cannon, the MBA’s new president, is picking up right where Wilkins left off.

When asked about his goals, Cannon gave a special mention to pairing high school students with law firms where they can work for a four-week period during the summer to get exposed to the legal profession.

He’s also particularly fond of seizing opportunities for pro bono work, such as the Saturday legal clinics the bar association hosts with Memphis Area Legal Services.

“The person who coordinates that at the library told us over the last year there were almost 1,200 people who took advantage of being able to come in there and speak to lawyers for free,” Cannon said. “And there were over 400 lawyers and about 125 paralegals who took part. I think that’s really important and really a great service to our community.”

The MBA’s new president also wants to take advantage of Downtown’s new training ground for lawyers at the University of Memphis’ Cecil C. Humphreys School of Law on Front Street. He said he’d like to see better coordination with the law students and faculty to find opportunities for students to be exposed to the court system Downtown and other lawyers.

Cannon’s hope is that would lead to opportunities for jobs – whether as clerks or lawyers or other roles in the legal community – when they get out of school.

“We’re the voice of the legal profession in the community,” Cannon said about the role his organization plays. “We also represent the opportunity for lawyers to help the community. We’re sort of a centralized location for volunteer work but also for continuing legal education.”

2010 has seen frequent examples of the thread being tightened at both ends between the city’s legal professionals and the community around them.

MBA communications director Dottie McCallen said the MBA’s Young Lawyers Division at the Nov. 18 annual meeting donated $4,000 to the Downtown Porter Boys & Girls Club.

Memphis Bar Foundation, the charitable foundation affiliated with the MBA, presented almost $44,000 – the largest amount in its history – to seven local causes.

The MBA this year worked with Mid-South Food Bank and Youth Villages. MBF president and Shelby County Circuit Court Judge Donna Fields said the foundation already anticipates providing a grant in 2011 to the National Civil Rights Museum – one of the seven recipients of the recent grant money.

“We can give back to the community both in time and money,” Fields said.
It’s about serving the profession and serving the community, is how Cannon puts it.

He’s a personal injury lawyer who over the last 10 years has concentrated his practice on mediation and arbitration work.

The thing about the job that still appeals to him is the thing that attracted him in the first place – the task of understanding and communicating the issues necessary for representing one side or the other.

“The challenge of getting an issue, figuring out what’s important and then communicating that to others, that’s what I think a lawyer really does a lot of,” Cannon said. “And that’s the challenge that’s always appealed to me.”