



Dean Dietrich:

Civility, Lawyer Wellness are Top Priorities for Ethics Giant

As State Bar president, Dean Dietrich also plans to focus on inclusion and addressing legal deserts in greater Wisconsin.



On July 1, Dean Dietrich began his one-year term as the 68th president of the State Bar of Wisconsin.
Photos: Emily Voss, Voss Studios, Wausau





BY JEFF M. BROWN



Dean Dietrich learned early in his career that a lawyer’s calling carries with it an awesome responsibility.

An elderly widow came to Dietrich for advice. Dietrich had done some estate planning for the woman and her husband and now the woman had to decide whether to have surgery. Should she have the surgery, the woman asked.

“I’m saying to myself, ‘Why are you asking me this?’” Dietrich said. “I’m not your family and I don’t know anything about this surgery.”

Dietrich turned the matter over in his mind, then shared his thoughts with his client. She went ahead with the surgery and died on the operating table.

For Dietrich, the 68th president of the State Bar of Wisconsin, the episode highlighted the special trust at the heart of the attorney-client relationship.

“That taught me what it means to be a lawyer,” Dietrich said.

That lesson has remained close to Dietrich during his 46-year legal career, during which he has practiced municipal, employment, and professional responsibility law.

Kevin Wolf, a former partner of Dietrich’s at Wausau’s Ruder Ware, said Dietrich is a perfect fit for the presidency.

“He’s worked his entire career to better the profession of law in Wisconsin and the integrity of the law and lawyers in Wisconsin,” Wolf said. “He’s really the kind of person we want in that position.”

‘He Was Just Driven’

Dietrich grew up in Milwaukee. His father served as the police chief in Fox Point, a suburb on the city’s north side.

Mike Williams has been a friend of Dietrich’s since the two attended University School of Milwaukee. They played together on the high school’s football, hockey, and baseball teams.

Williams, who recently retired as the chief deputy of the U.S. District Court for the Eastern District of Wisconsin, described Dietrich as a hard-working student with a strong sense of right and wrong – something he attributes to the elder Dietrich’s work as a police officer.

“Dean has always been involved with law enforcement, and laws and statutes, and he learned it at home, I’m sure,” Williams said.

Williams also said Dietrich was quick to help classmates with their assignments – work that presaged Dietrich’s decades traveling across Wisconsin to educate attorneys about legal ethics.

“He was always a good teacher,” Williams said. “If somebody had a problem, he would work with them and try to get them to understand.”

Williams said his surprise at learning that Dietrich planned to run for State Bar president at the age of 70 was short-lived, once he thought back to the person Dietrich was in high school.

“Dean had great character,” Williams said. “He was always in good shape; he was just driven. He was one of these guys who didn’t screw around a lot, he wasn’t lazy. He always was doing stuff.”



Ethics Eagle

Dietrich attended Marquette University, where he studied political science and sociology. He also served as captain of the school's club hockey team – a position that meant working with the team statistician, Cecelia Ann (C. Ann) Frank.

Dietrich and C. Ann worked together well, and in 1976, they wed. The next year, Dietrich graduated from Marquette University Law School. He's the fourth member of the Marquette University Law School Class of 1977 to serve as State Bar president.¹

After law school, Dietrich took a job with a firm in Fennimore, a small city in southwest Wisconsin. Dietrich was attracted to the firm because of its busy municipal practice.

Dietrich continued to practice municipal law when he moved to a firm in Wausau in 1979. Traipsing from county to county for after-hours school board meetings would wear down many attorneys. But Dietrich thrived on it.

"It was both fulfilling and very interesting to give legal guidance and political guidance to municipal officials without being the elected one," Dietrich said. "I would tell them what the political ramifications were of their thinking and their decisions, not just the legal side."

Dietrich also developed an interest in professional responsibility – an interest driven by a sense of duty.

"I want to help lawyers understand their obligations under the professional responsibility rules, and I don't want any lawyer to have challenges or



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problems with the regulatory authorities because they don't understand the rules," Dietrich said.

Over the last 30 years, Dietrich has spent countless hours giving talks on legal ethics to lawyer groups around the state. Since 2002, he's written a legal ethics column in *Wisconsin Lawyer* and is widely regarded as the dean of professional responsibility law in the state.

Williams said Dietrich's interest in legal ethics goes back to his upbringing.

"I think it was his dad's background in law enforcement," Williams said. "I just think he gravitated toward doing the right thing. He's a straight-arrow kind of guy. Always has been."

Experience an Asset to Bar

Wolf said Dietrich's expertise in legal ethics issues was invaluable to his clients – and his fellow partners.

"He's very calm," Wolf said. "When people call and they're in crisis, he's fantastic. He's a good listener, he's a good and thoughtful fixer. It was nice to have the ethics guy right there in your office."

Wolf said Dietrich's skill at handling thorny ethics issues will serve him well during his presidency.

"It's wonderful for the members of the State Bar to have him as a sounding board," Wolf said.

Matt Mayer works with Dietrich at Weld Riley S.C. Mayer said Dietrich possesses a certain gravitas – one that raises the bar when he enters a room.

"You want to stand a little bit taller because you're going to get measured by a person that's well-respected in the bar and you want to match that," Mayer said.

Mayer said Dietrich's decision to run for State Bar president came as no surprise.

"Dean has a sense of duty and responsibility that most people don't have," Mayer said. "He believes that you lead by example and you lead by service, and he lives it."

Dietrich's term as president will cap a long record of State Bar service. He served two terms on the State Bar's

Board of Governors (1990-91 and 1994-98) and one term as treasurer (2001-05).

Dietrich has served on the Finance Committee (chair 2000-04), the Professionalism Committee, and the Committee on Professional Ethics (chair 2005-20). He also has served as president of the Young Lawyers Division and the Senior Lawyers Division.

Senior and Young Lawyer Divide; Inclusion

Dietrich's experience as president of both the Young Lawyers Division and the Senior Lawyers Division informs his approach to one of the issues he plans to focus on during his term as president: the tension between senior lawyers and young lawyers.

"There's a huge tension, I feel, between the senior part of the bar and the young part of the bar," Dietrich said. "It's a tension I feel from talking to people. They don't necessarily articulate it or intend to articulate it."

Some of that tension, Dietrich said, is fueled by resistance to change on the part of senior lawyers. But some of it is also fueled by the fact that younger lawyers – most of whom grew up surrounded by digital technology – approach decision-making differently.

By way of example, Dietrich contrasts Board of Governors meetings from decades past, which were often marked by spirited debates over Robert's Rules of Order and other procedural arcana, with today's meetings.

"Today's younger lawyers say, 'Okay, you've given me some information, I've got a lot on my plate, let's make a decision and let's go,'" Dietrich said.

Adapting to change and the attitudes of lawyers lie at the heart of another issue Dietrich said he plans to focus on during his term: inclusion.

"We need to accept everyone regardless of their background and not let our concerns about background or diversity stop us from accepting everyone as part of our legal community," Dietrich said. "There are various sections of this



bar that are not included, and we have to be fighting to ensure that inclusion.”

As an example, Dietrich cites an experience he had when representing the Menominee Indian Tribe’s school board. Midway through a board meeting, the nation’s chief entered the room, and the

does to people, and I’ve seen it.”

Dietrich acknowledges that lawyer wellness begins with personal choice. He also acknowledges that he sometimes makes poor choices where wellness is concerned. For instance, working too much and not getting enough sleep

the importance of wellness and hope they make it a habit.”

Dietrich said it’s also time the State Bar did more to lure new lawyers to rural Wisconsin, to populate the “legal deserts” that are spreading there. He cited an Illinois State Bar program that pays recent law school graduates \$5,000 to move to a rural community and another \$5,000 after they complete their first year of practice there.

“We’re going to have to do something like that too,” Dietrich said.

Civility will also be a focus for Dietrich.

“Challenges to civility come from many different sources,” Dietrich said. “Both senior lawyers and younger lawyers work very hard to meet the needs of their clients while being faced with so many changes in technology and the law and the way that we practice law.”

“It puts lawyers under a lot of stress. We have to learn to understand the true stress, and also understand that we can continue to meet the needs of our clients without being sarcastic and demeaning to others.”



Dean Dietrich thinks a lot and cares a lot about lawyer wellness, saying, “We have for a long time ignored what the profession does to people, and I’ve seen it.”

meeting was paused while members of the nation stood to show respect.

“To me, that was an explanation of the importance of culture, the importance of community, the importance of how governance applies,” Dietrich said. “That’s what we need to convey to a lot of lawyers.”

Wellness and Civility; Legal Deserts

Lawyer wellness will be a third area of focus for Dietrich.

“I think a lot and care a lot about lawyer wellness,” Dietrich said. “We have for a long time ignored what the profession

– Dietrich is famous for leaving before-dawn voice mail messages with bar leaders and other colleagues.

“I do most of my hard thinking from three to six in the morning,” Dietrich said. “Once eight o’clock hits, the phone’s ringing, the emails are coming ... I’m very much an early riser.”

He says education is the key to improving lawyer wellness.

“Wellness means we need to help lawyers understand the importance of wellness and how to do it,” Dietrich said. “We’re not going to tell them what to do, but we’re going to educate them about

Bar Finances

Dietrich was sworn in at a ceremony at the Annual Meeting & Conference in Milwaukee in June that began minutes after the conclusion of a Board of Governors meeting marked by long debate over a proposal to establish a trust fund. The decision to adopt the proposal came two months after the Board of Governors voted to raise the annual dues for FY 2024.

Dietrich sees both moves as attempts to address financial conditions, which, like everything else in life, are subject to constant change.

“The investments, the increase in expenses, the desire of bar members and bar staff to provide more services and improve those services makes it a constant challenge to manage the finances and expand and improve services,” Dietrich said.

“I wish we could do all of that without having to increase dues, and a dues



increase should only be one component of determining the best financial arrangements and status of the bar.”

‘He Wants to Make His Community Better’

When Dietrich isn’t working, he tries to find time for golf. He learned the game while working as a caddy at Milwaukee Country Club when he was a boy. But he doesn’t get out as often as he’d like, Dietrich said.

Dietrich and C. Ann are also very involved in the Wausau community – in particular, supporting the Wausau Center for the Visual Arts.

“Dean is involved in so many different community activities,” Mayer said. “He wants to make his clients better, he wants to make his law firm better, he wants to make the bar better, he wants to make his community better, and he does that any way he can.”

Dietrich also serves as legal counsel to the Wisconsin Amateur Hockey Association in a pro bono capacity.

The Power of ‘Nudge’

In nearly 50 years of legal practice, Dietrich has had ups and downs. But he prefers to look ahead rather than in the rearview mirror. It’s a perspective informed by his days as a hockey player – and one destined to mark his tenure as president.

“Because hockey is so fast and there are so many things happening, if you make a mistake you’ve got three-one-hundredths of a second to think about what you did wrong, to think about whether you’re going to get yelled at, or to think ‘What did I learn from that mistake,’” Dietrich said.

That forward focus, Dietrich said, got him where he is today.

“I think it’s helped me in my career,

because I don’t fret over what’s happened,” Dietrich said. “What’s happened has happened, and now I’ve got to move on.”

Dietrich is realistic about how much he’ll be able to accomplish as State Bar president. As he begins his one-year term, Dietrich said he keeps one of his mother’s favorite words – “nudge” – uppermost in his mind.

“I need to nudge things along,” Dietrich said. “That doesn’t mean I’m going to fix it all at the end, but I’ve got to make sure it’s moving in the right direction.” **WL**

ENDNOTES

¹The others are John Decker (1990-91), Steven Sorenson (1997-98), and Patricia Ballman (2002-03). **WL**

 Michael P. Crooks Litigation	 Benjamin S. Stern Real Estate	 Grant E. Birtch Litigation/Probate	 Philip J. Bradbury Construction/ Real Estate	 Michael P. Carlton Environmental	 Joshua B. Cronin Divorce/Family	 William E. Fischer Business/Litigation	 Terry E. Johnson Litigation
 Frank W. Kowalkowski Construction/ Real Estate	 Beth Kushner Litigation	 Rick J. Mundt Litigation	 James T. Murray, Jr. Litigation	 Randy S. Nelson Trusts & Estates	 Steven L. Nelson Construction/Litigation	 Steven R. Sorenson Real Estate/ Employment	

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