



Ryan Billings:

Litigator Aims to Be Ambassador for Wisconsin Lawyers





As State Bar president, Ryan Billings plans to also focus on lawyer wellness and ensure that the State Bar provides good value to its members.

BY JEFF M. BROWN

In 20 years as a top-flight business litigator, Ryan Billings has just about seen it all.

“I have litigated just about everywhere in the United States, in matters involving small dollars to ten figures,” Billings said.

Billings, who became the State Bar of Wisconsin’s 69th president on July 1, plans to draw heavily upon that experience in his new role.

“That experience has exposed me to different court systems and different approaches to the practice of law,” Billings said. “It gives me a large pool of ideas to draw upon in solving problems.”

Chris Hanewicz, a partner at Perkins Coie LLP in Madison, said Billings’ attributes will serve him well during his year as president.

“Ryan is diligent,” Hanewicz said. “He’s not just a ‘head-nodder.’ He’ll dig into it on his own and then give you an opinion. But what makes him special is listening to other people.”

Forged in New York

Billings grew up in Sheboygan. He became interested in the legal profession after participating in the mock trial program at Sheboygan South High School.

Billings obtained his undergraduate degree from Princeton University and his law degree from Harvard Law School.

After law school, Billings took a job with Cravath, Swaine & Moore LLP in New York City.

“I really wanted to go big and get the challenge of working on the biggest, most complicated cases,” Billings said. “New York was always a mecca to me. I wanted to live there and work there.”

Billings spent most of his time at the firm defending clients against shareholder class actions and government regulatory investigations.

Cravath, Swaine & Moore, one of the nation’s largest firms, is known for the “Cravath system” – a system for hiring, training, and paying lawyers developed by Paul Drennan Cravath 125 years ago.

The firm’s approach to working up a case made a mark on Billings.

“I learned how to work every part of a case at an exceptional level and how hard you have to work to make sure that you achieve perfection,” Billings said.

Back to the Badger State

After six years at Cravath, Swaine & Moore, Billings moved back to Wisconsin to accept a position in the Glendale office of Kohner, Mann & Kailas S.C. He chairs the firm’s business litigation department.

“Many times, the cases I had wouldn’t support the level of staffing or detail or review that Cravath had, but I could take the ideas I’d learned and adapt them to my Wisconsin cases,” Billings said.

One of those cases is a federal antitrust case that has dragged on for 17 years across multiple jurisdictions. The case, which calls to mind *Jarndyce v. Jarndyce*, the fictional probate case that shambled on for generations in Charles Dickens’ novel *Bleak House*, has served as a proving ground for Billings in his run-up to the presidency.

Billings is one of dozens of plaintiffs’ attorneys on the case. Andrew Ennis, a shareholder with the Polsinelli Law Firm’s Kansas City office, is another.

Ennis said that Billings has earned a reputation for being able to surf both the details of the case and the personalities of the attorneys working on it.

“Ryan quickly became the trusted counsel for the Wisconsin part of the case,” Ennis said. “People knew Ryan would give it to them straight, people



knew [he] was being honest, being direct, being truthful.”

Hanewicz is also representing a plaintiff in the antitrust case. He said Billings has brought an open mind to his work on the case.

“I never feel that Ryan has said his piece and then closes up shop when others are talking,” Hanewicz said. “His mind is always open to finding a better solution through the input of others, and that’s a confidence that the best lawyers demonstrate.”

‘Wisconsin Stacks Up Very Well’

Billings’ extensive trial work has done more than provide him with ideas for improving the practice of law in Wisconsin. It’s also shown him how well the state’s legal system is working.

“Compared to the other jurisdictions I’ve practiced in, Wisconsin stacks up very well,” Billings said. “I credit that to judges, administrators, State Bar staff and presidents, and Board of Governors members.”

That outlook will help Billings with something he intends to emphasize from day one of his presidency – being an ambassador for State Bar members.

“Lawyers serve an essential purpose in society,” Billings said. “We’re designed to represent our clients, to be advocates for them and use our specialized knowledge to help them. That message needs to continually be said in everything we think and everything we do and in every way we portray ourselves.”

Billings is no stranger to State Bar leadership. He served two terms on the State Bar’s Board of Governors and as

the State Bar’s representative to the Judicial Council.

Additionally, Billings has served on the Board’s executive committee and as the vice-chair and the chair of the Board’s policy committee.

Problem Solver

Billings’ State Bar service typifies his approach to the profession, Ennis said.

“He’s conscientious, highly professional, and beyond reproach ethically,” Ennis said. “He has all the hallmarks that you want to stand out about our profession. His desire to put himself at the forefront to advance the profession is admirable.”

Hanewicz said that Billings’ issue-spotting skills will serve him well as president.

“He’s going to face some difficult intellectual and difficult political challenges,” Hanewicz said. “His ability to identify problems is going to be a valuable asset.”

“He’ll be able to understand the challenge, and then he [can] fall back on his ability to listen to different solutions. If you don’t understand the problem, you’re only going to accidentally be part of the solution.”

Pedigree would make some attorneys with Ivy League degrees and big-firm experience part of the problem. Not so with Billings, Hanewicz said.

“For being such a bright guy, I never get a feeling of imperiousness from Ryan,” Hanewicz said. “You’d never know he was anybody else other than someone you’d run into on the street.”

A lack of imperiousness is an important quality in a State Bar president, given that the position requires a deft diplomatic touch and more than a little needle-threading. Billings said the way law is practiced in Wisconsin will make those tasks easier.

“One of the things that I really enjoyed coming back from New York was the civility and professionalism with which lawyers treat each other here,” Billings said.

Billings said he’s looking forward to working with the Board of Governors.

“The board is a group of volunteers who are all earnestly looking for the best solution,” Billings said. “The board is an organization where lawyers treat each other with mutual respect and approach things with sincerity.”

“As passionate as people get about issues, the board is essentially apolitical. It’s about solving problems and finding the best solutions to those problems.”

Fellowship, Collegiality

Billings’ professional service extends beyond the State Bar. He’s active in the Thomas E. Fairchild American Inn of Court in Milwaukee.

“Ryan has been a fantastic member for years,” said Laura Brenner, a shareholder at Reinhart Boerner Van Deuren s.c. in Milwaukee. “He’s so good at developing programs that teach others that we put him on the programs committee.”

Part of what makes Billings so good at teaching others, Brenner said, is his dry sense of humor. It’s a trait that will come in handy when Billings is facing presidential challenges.

“He’s really clever, really smart, and really good at listening and working on a team to put on presentations,” Brenner said.

Brenner thinks Billings will make a good president.

“It’s wonderful to have somebody who listens and works well with others and who’s interested in mentoring, fellowship, and collegiality,” Brenner said.

Value Is an Obligation

At the top of Billings’ plan for his presidency is ensuring that the State Bar is providing value to its 25,000-plus members.

“We need to be thinking at all times how everything we do is a benefit for our members, and to focus our efforts on the things that provide the greatest benefit to the greatest number of people, especially [because] we’re a mandatory bar,” Billings said.



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For Billings, providing value to members is an obligation as much as it is a proposition.

"I view it as an obligation that we provide meaningful value to every member," Billings said. "We need to be asking, 'Is this providing value to a wide swath of our members such that it's worth the resources the bar is spending on it, and that members are required to spend on it?'"

'Out of the Shadows'

Another focus for Billings will be supporting lawyer wellness.

In a 2023 survey of 2,000 lawyers in California and Washington, D.C., 66% of respondents said that working as a lawyer had harmed their mental health, and 46% said they were thinking about leaving the law because of stress or burnout.

Billings said he wants to "take discussions of mental health issues that lawyers struggle with out of the shadows."

"There's been a culture change in the past 20 years and it's becoming more acceptable to talk about that, and I'd like to continue that discussion," Billings said. "We need to continually establish that it is okay to talk about mental health, to talk about stress, to talk about secondary trauma."

Attorney Shortage

Billings said he'll continue to push the State Bar to work on addressing the shortage of lawyers in some areas of Wisconsin and the chronic understaffing of district attorney and state public defender offices.

In 2023, the Wisconsin Legislature significantly boosted pay for district attorneys and public defenders; it also boosted the rate the state pays to private attorneys who take public defender cases. But there's more to do, Billings said.

"Those are three challenges that everybody knows about and that the Bar has been working on forever," Billings said. "But I think it's a priority for us to keep working on and I'd like to make it a priority of my presidency."

Into the Breach

Billings ascended to the presidency a year earlier than he planned to.

In April, Billings was elected to a one-year term as president-elect – a term due to begin on July 1. Under State Bar bylaws, the president-elect serves a one-year term before serving a one-year term as president.

However, in May, the Board appointed Billings to fill the vacancy in the office of president-elect created in March when Jane Bucher resigned to accept an appointment to the Green County Circuit Court.

State Bar bylaws require that the State Bar president be elected by the members, so the Board had to either appoint Billings to the vacant president-elect position so he could become president on July 1 or call a special presidential election on short notice.

The Board has called a special election for this October to fill the vacancy in the office of president-elect created when Billings was appointed to Bucher's spot.

Since his appointment, Billings has been busy trying to fit preparation for the presidency around his trial schedule. He said he's leaned heavily on past presidents Dean Dietrich and Margaret

Hickey. He's also been calling other past presidents, to pick their brains on the tasks ahead of him.

"I suspect that we're going to have to lean a little bit harder on whomever wins the special election for president-elect," Billings said. "We're a team, and when one member is down, we draw on each other to make up the difference. It's a lot of learning very quickly."

Fast Start

Before jumping into the thicket, Billings and his wife will take a long-planned trip to Jackson Hole, Wyoming.

Billings said, "I've never been there, and we've rented a place with no TV and no internet service."

To get up to speed in his new position, Billings will have to draw on his formative years practicing law in fast-paced Gotham.

"I'm going to be taking office with less on-the-job training than a normal president would and also with less time to set up my agenda and start building consensus," Billings said. "So, I'm going to have to do everything faster. That's just the way it is." **WL**

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