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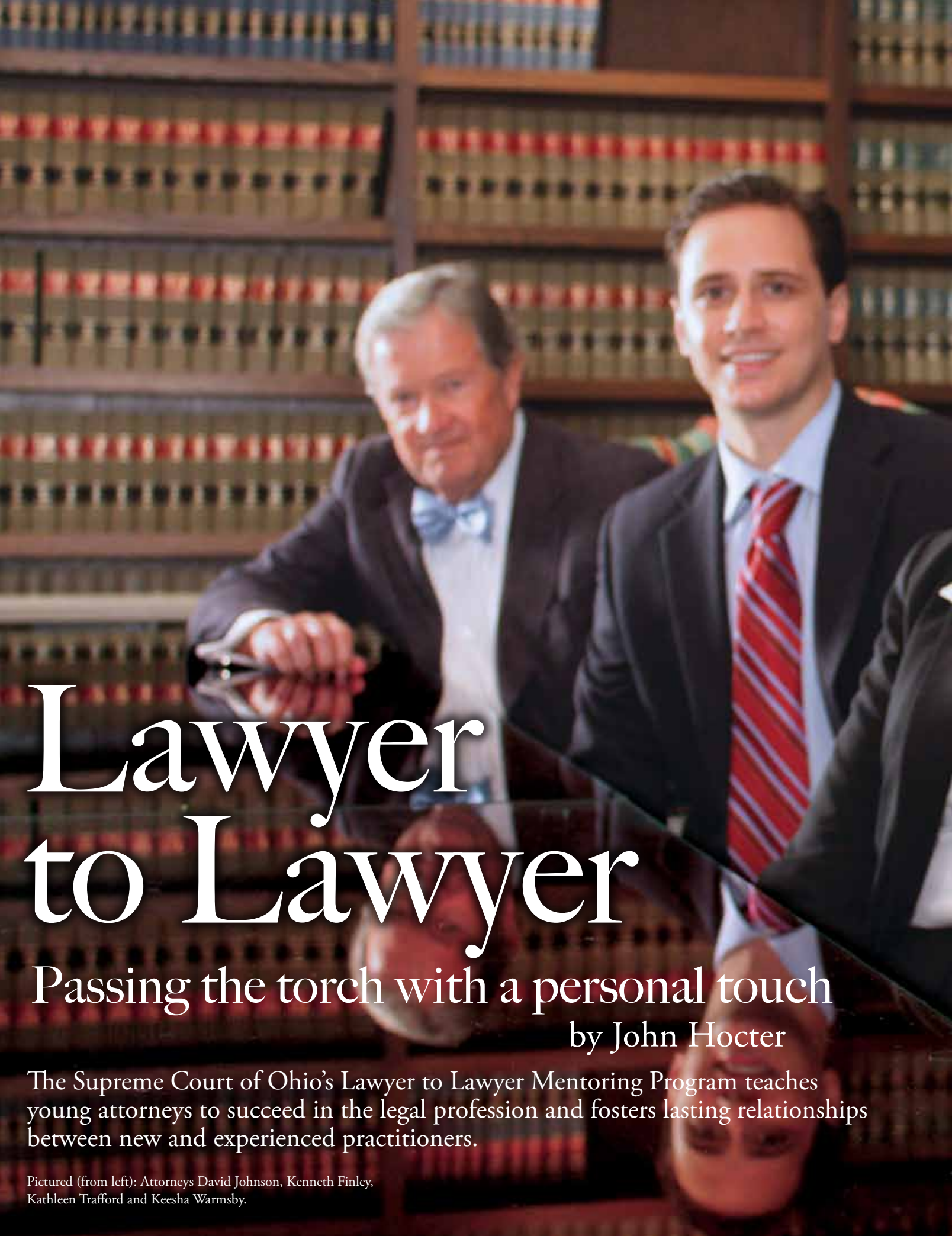
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Lawyer to Lawyer

Passing the torch with a personal touch
by John Hocter

The Supreme Court of Ohio's Lawyer to Lawyer Mentoring Program teaches young attorneys to succeed in the legal profession and fosters lasting relationships between new and experienced practitioners.

Pictured (from left): Attorneys David Johnson, Kenneth Finley, Kathleen Trafford and Keesha Warmbsy.



“I’m sort of like your Yoda,”

cracks David Johnson, perennial Super Lawyer and partner-in-charge of the Columbus office of Taft, Stettinius and Hollister. Seated directly across the table is Kenneth Finley, a 28-year-old small firm associate just finishing his first full year of law practice. “The people in your office say I look like I could be your nephew,” Finley retorts, a precocious smile spreading across his face. This is the ninth and final in-person meeting between the two attorneys as part of the Supreme Court of Ohio Lawyer to Lawyer Mentoring Program, but it feels as though they have known each other for years. “We’ve met many more times than required, including socially at each others’ homes, and I imagine we’ll continue to stay in touch,” says Johnson. “I like to keep in contact with all my protégés.”

Johnson is on his fourth so-called protégé—new lawyers who seek out the Court’s mentoring program as a way to grow their understanding of the legal profession and learn the subtle nuances of practice not imparted to them during law school. Between jokes and anecdotes about mutual acquaintances and shared experiences, the two get down to some of the less glamorous aspects of conducting business as a lawyer. “The worst part of my first year has been discussing fees with clients,” admits Finley, a matter to which his 64-year-old counterpart across the table can relate. “I can tell you that uneasiness never goes away,” Johnson assures him, explaining that despite the difficult position of asking clients for fees during some of the most distressing times in their lives, a lawyer should never feel guilty about placing value on his or her services. “Let them know they’re getting what they’re paying for, and that’s good, sound legal representation.” Finley nods silently, as if locking his advice away to be accessed the next time this uncomfortable situation arises.

Scenes like this one are evidence of the tremendous value of the Court’s Lawyer to Lawyer Mentoring Program, not only to the experienced mentors and new lawyers who make the yearlong commitment to participate, but also to the future prosperity of the legal profession. With nearly half of Ohio’s lawyers reaching or approaching retirement age in the coming years, the challenge to prepare the next generation of skilled attorneys is greater than ever.¹ But the technical

aspects of law practice are not the only lessons these young lawyers are hoping to learn. “Practicing law entails becoming a part of a professional community,” says Supreme Court of Ohio Attorney Services Counsel Lori Keating, who administers the program. “To do this successfully, you must learn the expectations, customs and etiquette of the legal community.”

Imparting these specialized skills to new attorneys through professional and interpersonal relationships has been an objective of the Lawyer to Lawyer program since its inception. Started as a pilot in 2006 before being permanently adopted by the Court in 2008, the program aspires to “elevate the competence, professionalism and success of Ohio lawyers through positive mentoring relationships.” This year’s class of mentees numbers 620 so far, a dramatic increase from the 174 who ushered in the program five years ago. In all, more than 1,800 new attorneys have enrolled and completed the mentoring program. These burgeoning practitioners—94 percent of whom say they are now better lawyers because of the program—are stewards of the continued success and integrity of law practice in Ohio.² According to Keating, “Positive mentoring experiences enhance the professionalism of the legal community and are vital to the future of our profession.”

The Court’s Lawyer to Lawyer program is about more than just professionalism, however. At a lunch meeting in downtown Columbus, Keesha Warmbsby, staff attorney to the Hon. Timothy S. Horton of the Franklin County Court of Common Pleas, sits opposite her mentor, Kathleen Trafford, a partner with Porter Wright Morris & Arthur. Trafford is regularly listed in *The Best Lawyers in America* in the area of trial litigation and serves as chair of the Ohio State Committee of the American College of Trial Lawyers, but today’s meeting starts with a discussion about recent home improvements. “I’ve

been literally watching the paint dry,” says Trafford, drawing a chuckle from her young mentee, who handpicked the accomplished attorney as a mentor based on her résumé and prior success in the field. “I was actually a little intimidated to meet Kathleen at first,” says Warmbsby. “You would think with all the success that she would be hard to get to know or hard to talk to, but she’s so sweet and so down to earth.”

After discussing vacation plans for the summer, the two delve into subjects ranging from the life of an associate attorney to the nuances of litigation, such as advising clients on whether it makes sense to take a case to trial. “People laugh when I tell them that even though I’m a litigator, I spend a lot of time with clients explaining why they don’t want to bring a case,” says Trafford. “Once you put the emotions aside and give them that practical analysis, they realize they don’t want to get involved. And then you say ‘darn!’ But that’s part of the job.”

This kind of wisdom passed on through the mentoring relationship often revolves around how to conduct oneself within the legal community, including advice on how to serve and interact with clients, colleagues, judges, clerks, paralegals, office staff and other professionals one meets while living life as a lawyer—not only professionally, but also on a personal level. While young attorneys may be able to glean some of these skills from more experienced lawyers within their own employers’ ranks, contact with outside attorneys through mentoring allows for a more unrestricted and honest exchange of questions, answers and helpful advice. “One thing I took comfort in was that David was so personable and frank with me that I felt like I could ask him any question I wanted to,” says Finley of his relationship with Johnson. “So I feel comfortable going to David about anything.”

“The success of the Lawyer to Lawyer mentoring program is evident by the many testimonials from the new lawyers and their mentors. The mentoring partnership fosters a professional relationship that continues long after the yearlong program concludes. I’m very proud of the work of the Supreme Court and Justice O’Donnell in developing this rewarding experience.”

— Chief Justice Maureen O’Connor

The benefits received by new lawyers who participate in the program inevitably spill over to their volunteer mentors, who are quick to point out how much they relish the opportunity to advise their younger colleagues. “It gives you a chance to get excited about it all over again,” says Trafford of the mentoring experience. “When I see someone starting from the beginning of their career looking forward ... I get a little jealous.” She recalls how her own mentor, Samuel Porter, gave her ideas and direction for her career, kindled her interest in bar association activities and showed her the ropes by inviting her along for meetings with clients and colleagues. “Sam couldn’t have been nicer ... and I really appreciated that.”

Like Trafford, many of the volunteer mentors involved with the program are simply repaying the favors performed for them by their own former mentors. Johnson, who is also listed in *Best Lawyers* under corporate law, is quick to share an experience he had with an attorney he admired as a brand-new lawyer, J. Mack Swigert, who taught him how much one can learn from younger attorneys just starting out in the practice of law. “Mr. Swigert came to the office every day until January of this year, and he died several months ago at the age of 103 and a half. I never heard him begin a story with ‘Well you know, back in my day ...’ He wanted to talk about, ‘How do we do it now?’ He learned how to do the Internet, email ... he probably even ‘Tweeted,’” says Johnson. He believes the Supreme Court’s mentoring efforts help sharpen the edge of experienced attorneys who make the commitment to volunteer as mentors. “Participating in this program is sort of how you keep your focus and perspective on what’s happening now, not what happened 20 or 30 years ago. It does help keep you younger.”

According to the Court, this mutual gain by both mentee and mentor is one characteristic of the Lawyer to Lawyer program that keeps successful but busy attorneys coming back as repeat volunteers. “One of the most exciting and perhaps unexpected aspects of our program is how much the mentors enjoy their experience,” says Keating. “They report feeling rejuvenated after meeting and working with enthusiastic new lawyers.”

While being a mentor can be extremely rewarding and beneficial to the experienced attorneys who commit their time,



Johnson, Finley, Trafford and Warmsby discuss their experiences in the Lawyer to Lawyer Mentoring Program.

the amount of young lawyers seeking to participate in the program is growing by the year. Because of this reason, the Court maintains an open application schedule throughout the year for those interested in mentoring—and with an especially large number of new attorneys expected to be admitted in November, the demand for volunteer mentors is greater than ever. “[The Court] needs to maintain a large supply of mentors from a diverse array of practice areas and practice types so that we will be able to facilitate the best mentoring matches,” Keating explains.

Once matched with a mentoring partner, each participating attorney—mentee and mentor—has a unique experience during the course of the program, but most of the relationships forged through Lawyer to Lawyer last well beyond the yearlong timeframe. In fact, 97 percent of both new lawyers and mentors who took part in the program in 2010 said they believed they would maintain a relationship with their mentoring partner after the term concluded.³ The result is the formation of hundreds of valuable interactions, connections and friendships that remain intact for the length of many attorneys’ careers.

Warmsby, for one, is looking forward to continuing her professional learning under Trafford, and is thankful for the lessons she has already learned from her mentor. “In law school, we heard all these stories and read cases about attorneys who messed up, and I didn’t want to be that person. I asked Kathleen to help shed light on how to avoid those major mistakes, and she’s definitely doing that.”

At the end of their final meeting as part of the program, Johnson offers Finley one

last bit of advice on coming of age as an attorney. “There comes a time, sometime after the first year [of practice], when you suddenly become confident,” he says. “You know that you don’t know everything. But you also know that’s ok.”

For the young lawyers and experienced mentors completing the Supreme Court’s Lawyer to Lawyer Mentoring Program, the lessons—and the relationships—are just beginning. ■

For more information about becoming involved in the Supreme Court of Ohio Lawyer to Lawyer Mentoring Program, visit www.supremecourt.ohio.gov/lattysvcs/mentoring, or contact Lori Keating at (614) 387-9317 or lori.keating@scohio.gov.

Author bio



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Endnotes

- ¹ *Masters at the Bar Task Force Report*, pg. 23, Ohio State Bar Association, 2010, www.ohiobar.org/General%20Resources/pubs/Masters_at_the_Bar.pdf.
- ² Figures courtesy of the Supreme Court of Ohio, www.supremecourt.ohio.gov/AttySvc/mentoring.
- ³ *Id.*