STEWARDS OF THE LAW:
WALTER REYNOLDS ON MENTORING, DIVERSITY AND COMMUNITY

By Ray Miller

The first thing you need to know about Walter Reynolds is that he believes in paying it forward. From his first experience with law as a young African-American man growing up in Georgia to his appointment as the first African-American president of the Dayton Bar Association, Walter has consistently given back to his community. As a mentor and leader, Walter combines his impressive background with a dose of good humor.

Q&A with Walter Reynolds, Partner-In-Charge of Porter Wright Morris & Arthur LLP, Dayton

What inspired you to become a lawyer?

I was inspired to become a lawyer because of my father's adverse situation with our judicial system. I vividly recall growing up in Georgia, where my father was cited for some type of traffic violation. He received a call indicating that there was no reason for him to show up for that hearing. So he didn't. Unbeknownst to him, that was not the case. He was ultimately arrested and incarcerated for a short time.

I was moved by that situation because I felt that had we been able to afford a lawyer, who could represent my father competently, whatever defense he would have had, he would have been able to present it. Not necessarily that he would have won, but he would have been able to present that defense. He was not afforded that opportunity. He was not able to take full advantage of the laws and rights provided by our justice system because of his lack of knowledge. That memory stayed with me. My whole goal originally was to become a criminal lawyer; I knew nothing about civil law. My goal was to help those who couldn't afford the price of a very competent lawyer.

How did you become a civil attorney?

In my second year of law school at the University of Dayton, I started to suffer difficulty with my vision. I had to start sitting in the front of the class and, in order to be assured of getting that seat, I would get to class early.

The professor was a lawyer named John Henry, who was the managing partner of a civil firm, Estabrook Finn & McKee. I started talking with him, and he thought I was a very diligent student since I was one of the first to arrive in his class and I paid attention. He invited me to interview at his law firm

in the summer of 1977, and they offered me a summer clerkship; I was offered full-time employment at the end of the summer. Estabrook merged with Porter Wright, and I've been with the firm ever since. Estabrook did not do criminal law work; it was a business law firm. My whole motivation for becoming a lawyer changed at that point because of this unique opportunity that was put in front of me.

You were the first African-American President of the Dayton Bar Association. Tell us more about that.

It goes back to the managing partner of the firm, John Henry. He was an advocate for the legal profession. John felt that lawyers have a duty to our community and to the profession. The firm insisted that every associate be a member of the Ohio State Bar Association and the Dayton Bar Association. After I became involved in the committees, people started to identify me as a person who can move up the ranks in the bar. I ultimately became the President of the organization. Because I grew up in the South and am African-American, I was interested in diversity. One of the things that we started during my tenure as President was the Diversity Issue Committee, where we always have an African-American co-chair and a Caucasian co-chair. This led to the annual Diversity Day sponsored by the Dayton Bar Association.

Did you encounter any challenges as an African-American in the law community?

Other trailblazers before made the road a lot smoother. They were people like Judge John Petzold, who was a former Bar President and believed early on that I could one day be President of the Bar. When you have people who are your advocates, you may not even notice the rough spots. I had people like Judge Petzold, Charlie Faruki and Judge Jeffrey Froelich, who were well respected in the community, behind me. It made my ability to assume the role as President and to govern a lot easier. If there were concerns or issues, they really never came to my attention. I had other people who believed it was time for the Bar to have its first African-American President and I had paid my dues and therefore they were supporting me.

How does that inspire or impact your drive to mentor others?

Because others helped me, I worked to help others. I've worked with or mentored many leaders within the law community who eventually became presidents of the Dayton Bar Association themselves. The most recent African-American president is an attorney who works at LexisNexis, Kermit Lowery. I met Kermit when he was a second-year law student at the University of Dayton. Every Saturday, I would volunteer to meet with about four law students to work with them on how to take the exams, how to prepare better for class, and the importance of having a study group. Kermit was one of the students.

I have reached out to help others, but also in doing that, the Bar Association is better because of the diversity that we've had.

Can you tell me more about Diversity Day?

When we first started to do a diversity day, we hired a client to make a video that focused on the importance of diversity. We had little skits that we would play to prepare people for Diversity Day. All of the judges closed court for the whole day, and encouraged all of their staff to attend, and all of the major law firms to set aside a time to attend Diversity Day. Because all of the judges were going to be there, the lawyers who liked to be seen with judges and liked to be seen by judges will attend.

During the event, we talked about the importance of diversity in our legal profession; we talked about the importance of diversity in the majority firms; and we talked about the importance of increasing diversity in our law schools. Our speakers would talk about the number of African-Americans who were in law school, the problems in terms of graduating, the graduation rates,

Continued on Page 23

Continued from Page 22

the bar passage rates, and the employment opportunities.
The idea was to identify and implement solutions and eliminate barriers to make sure the people begin to appreciate that we really have more in common than we have differences. It's important for the legal profession that we have diversity, inclusiveness and equality in the law. We are stewards of the law, and if we don't do it, then what example are we setting for others?

What drew you to mentoring?

For those that have been given much, there is a requirement for you to also give.

When I first started, I was ill prepared for a career in law. Most people that I started practicing law with had a family or a neighbor who was a lawyer. I didn't know one person who was a lawyer. When I started to practice law, I was ill prepared for the rigors expected in a firm. I struggled mightily, and, but for the mentorship of John Henry, I would not have been able to succeed. I was one of the few people who took the Ohio State Bar exam who didn't pass on my first time. I missed it by three points. At some law firms, it's an up and out. You pass and move up or you fail and move out. But because of John Henry, I was allowed to take the bar exam a second time. Not only was I allowed to take it, I was given a personal loan by John Henry to pay the cost to take a bar preparation course in Cleveland Ohio. The next time I took it, I got one of the highest scores ever achieved on the Ohio State Bar exam.

After being at the firm for about six months, I was told that I was just not working at the pace that was expected of me, and I was put on probation. I was concerned about whether I would ever have a career as a lawyer. John Henry came to me and said, 'Walter, you're worried about the wrong things. What you should really be worried about is whether I believe that you can succeed here, and I still have faith in you. But you're going to have to do some things to help yourself. You're a pretty good speaker, but your writing needs Improvement.' He suggested that I go to night school at Sinclair Community College and take a course to improve my writing. But John did more. Every day at lunch, John and I would go through any assignments, and he suggested ways that my work could be improved. After about a year-and-a-half of doing this, I was allowed to continue on, and I was removed from probation.

Within about four and a half years from that point, I became a partner and ultimately the managing partner of the Dayton office. Having had another person to act as a mentor for me, to get me through the difficult things in my career, how could I not do that for others?

I believe I was placed here and went through some of those difficult things so that I would be able to help others. I want to make sure that they don't have to go through all the things that I went through. It sounds spiritual to have gone through some of those difficult things, but I believe that. I mentor because someone did it for me.

Can you tell me more about the Lawyer to Lawyer Mentoring Program?

The Ohio Supreme Court felt that as the legal profession has grown, there are pressures on the legal profession to be more like a business than a profession and a lot of the soft skills that you would pick up, by being in a smaller legal community or in a small firm, are missed by the new lawyers. They decided to offer this mentoring program by pairing the younger lawyers with more senior lawyers. Jamar King approached me, an associate then at the law firm Thompson Hine, and asked me to be his mentor through this year-long program from the Supreme Court. I met Jamar, who's an African-American lawyer in a majority firm, and I was able to share some of the experiences that I had being an African-American lawyer at a majority firm and help him navigate successfully. I got a chance to know a young attorney at the beginning of his career who I think is going to be a leader in the Bar and whose work will be important to the Dayton legal community.

What about your work with the Leadership Honors Program at the University of Dayton?

I agreed to be a mentor, and they assigned to me a mentee, Simeon Lyons. We've met maybe five or six times over the course of last year, and he was my guest at Diversity Day. As part of that experience, he made a presentation and met Federal District Judge Walter Rice. Judge Rice offered Simeon a clerkship opportunity this summer. Simeon clerked in the federal court, which was a wonderful experience for any law student, especially if you want to have a career in the Dayton community.

What do you wish you'd known as a young lawyer?

I wish I had been better at writing. You don't pick that skill up as a young lawyer. Being a good writer goes back deeper, all the way back to the training you have in your undergrad school and the training you have in your law school, and then when you get to be a lawyer you apply that training.

Writing is something you do from the very first day you become a lawyer to your last day in practice.

Thurgood Marshall is a source of inspiration for you. Can you tell me more about that?

I have three kids, two daughters and a son. My son's name is Alexander Marshall Reynolds, and Marshall is taken from Thurgood Marshall.

As a lawyer and as a person who grew up in the sixties, I realized how important the work of Thurgood Marshall was. He was the lead attorney on Brown vs. Board of Education, the decision from the Supreme Court that overruled separate but equal. He was the first African-American to be appointed to the Supreme Court. His work as the attorney for the NAACP, where he argued most of these major civil rights cases in the Supreme Court, should be admired by any lawyer who believes in the rule of law.

While we don't have a holiday for him, some of the things that Thurgood Marshall did are just as important for this country as what Dr. King did. Thurgood Marshall used the law, where Dr. King used the moral authority. Whether you're black or white, you have to appreciate the things that Thurgood Marshall did. Through his advocacy, our country was able to avoid some of the disruptions that a lot of the apartheid systems had. Our country was able to move to a more perfect place by Mr. Marshall's use of the law.

Think about what we've been able to do. I grew up in a society where you had swimming pools that were for blacks and you had swimming pools that were for whites. You had water fountains that were for blacks and you had water fountains that were white. All of that changed because of Brown vs. Board of Education and the advocacy of Thurgood Marshall.

We talk about diversity, we talk about inclusiveness, and we talk about equality, but these are concepts Thurgood Marshall was instrumental in creating back in the fifties and the sixties and that still are important today. What better name could my son have than Marshall?

Walter is partner-in-charge of the firm's Dayton, Ohio office and has developed an excellent reputation representing brokerage firms, banks, insurance companies, savings and loan associations and other financial institutions. As a partner in the firm, he has handled many construction disputes representing owners, contractors, subcontractors, and material suppliers. He is listed in The Best Lawyers in America® in the area of Bankruptcy and Creditor-Debtor Rights/Insolvency and Reorganization Law and is recognized by Ohio Super Lawyers®. He holds a BA in Political Science from Wilberforce University and a JD from the University of Dayton School of Law.