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## Lawyer puts passion for civil justice system to work for plaintiffs

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Between managing a full case load in Chicago and lobbying in Springfield, Bruce M. Kohen has squeezed in some planning.

Kohen said he has spent the better part of a year preparing for his presidency of the Illinois Trial Lawyers Association, an office he was to assume on Friday.

In a recent phone interview, Kohen outlined an agenda — complete with sections and subsections — that he said will help accomplish his main goal as president: strengthening the state's civil justice system.

"And that is a broad and challenging goal, but it truly is necessitated by the ever increasing levels of attacks and the groups that are out to destroy the civil justice system," Kohen said. "The Illinois Trial Lawyers Association has to stand as a guiding light to try to preserve that system."

Detailed plans aside, though, Kohen acknowledged that "you can't solve the problem in one year and you can't solve the problem by yourself."

Luckily, Kohen said, he has the support of a law firm that understands and encourages involvement in ITLA. Kohen, a partner in Anesi, Ozmon, Rodin, Novak & Kohen Ltd., will be the third partner from the firm to serve as president. Nat P. Ozmon held the post in 1969 and Curt N. Rodin served in 1994.

While it can be tough to juggle a full case load and the responsibilities of being president, Rodin said, he has faith in Kohen's abilities.

"If you do it right, it's a full-time job," Rodin said. "Not only do I have faith in Bruce, I have great admiration for him. He is a wonderful lawyer and person."

Jim Collins, executive director of ITLA, echoed Rodin's sentiments. After working with Kohen for more than a decade, Collins said, he has come to see that "no one works harder than he does." The combination of work ethic and passion for the civil justice system will make Kohen an ideal ITLA president, Collins said.



Bruce M. Kohen

Rodin said the fact that Kohen "works his tail off" for his clients is good news for ITLA. Once Kohen takes over as president, he will treat the group as a client, Rodin said.

Not only does Rodin have faith in Kohen as a president, but he said if he ever needed a lawyer, Kohen would be his first choice. The two met during their days at the University of Illinois, where Rodin rushed Kohen into his fraternity.

Rodin also helped Kohen get a job as a clerk at Anesi, Ozmon while he was attending Chicago-Kent College of Law. Kohen worked his way up and is now a partner in the firm specializing in personal-injury, products liability, medical malpractice, wrongful-death and construction-related injury matters.

Kohen said there are four subparts to his goal: defending the right to trial by jury, protecting the judiciary, providing fair access to the courts and upholding constitutional rights.

He said he intends to achieve the goal by working with the General Assembly and educating members of the public and media in order to create a level playing field between plaintiffs and defendants.

Lobbying the legislature is something Kohen is familiar with. He made regular appearances in Springfield to testify on behalf of his group this spring.

Rodin said working with the General Assembly is an important part of the president's job and that Kohen "knows everyone in Springfield, and more importantly, they know him."

Kohen said the Wrongful Death Act, which was recently signed into law by the governor and which will allow juries to consider grief and sorrow when awarding damages, is "a perfect example" of ITLA's effort to "right a wrong."

One common element as he weighed in on potential legislation this spring was the person at the other end of the witness table. During several Judiciary Committee hearings, Kohen debated Jeffrey S. Hebrank, president-elect of the Illinois Association of Defense Trial Counsel and a partner in Burroughs, Hepler, Broom, MacDonald, Hebrank & True LLP in Edwardsville.

Even though the debates occasionally got heated, Kohen said, "there is absolutely no bad blood on my part."

"I don't take any of that personally. I recognized that Jeff is there advocating a position and I understand that," Kohen said. "While on opposite sides of issues, it's important to be strong advocates, but that doesn't mean you can't stay civil toward each other."

Hebrank agreed with Kohen, laughing as he recalled one particularly contentious hearing at which Kohen referred to Hebrank's arguments as "bologna."

"As adversaries in the courtroom, trial lawyers first of all can be a little flamboyant and fairly dramatic," Hebrank said. "But it's our nature to fight like the Dickens in the courtroom and then, after the day is done, shake each others' hand and say, 'Man, you were a worthy adversary.'"

But Kohen said he didn't want to look back just now.

"It is a great responsibility to head up this fantastic organization of over 2,000 trial lawyers," Kohen said. "I am honored to lead the organization and humbled by the responsibility of making sure that our goals and ideals carry on."