

Spotlight: Bill Powers Steps into a Rare Role

By Sonya Pfeiffer

It is no secret that there is this thing between Raleigh and Charlotte. The sometimes obvious, sometimes subtle *thing*. Not exactly a competition or rivalry; indeed, if you ask any nice and polite North Carolinian from either city you are likely to get a politically correct response, like “we need each other.” But bless our own hearts, the truth is we in Charlotte have historically operated like an independent state, confidently deflecting playful barbs like those made in Charlotte Magazine by Jennifer Bosser, when she was assistant executive director of Wake County Economic Development. Bosser described the difference between the City of Oaks and the Queen City like this:

“If you wanted to draw the distinction between Raleigh and Charlotte, I’ve always seen Raleigh as a center of innovation and much more [a] creator of something new. Whereas Charlotte has always been the user of technology that’s created out of Raleigh.”

Hmmm. For those of us who practice law in the great state of Mecklenburg, this mindset illustrates the divide that can play out politically as well as economically. Enter Bill Powers, the newly minted president of North Carolina Advocates for Justice (NCAJ).

“Until we have a four-lane highway to the beach, then you know how active Charlotte is in politics. People on Jones Street love our tax revenue but don’t always want to hear what we have to say about our government, and Charlotte has been fine with that. But we need to do better,” Powers says.

As president of NCAJ, Powers is walking the talk. Powers is only the fourth Charlottean to be elected president of NCAJ, a more-than-50-year-old organization that is constantly in the mix when it comes to issues that impact individual rights. The organization lobbies the legislature and has a voice in decision-making bodies across the state. Formerly the North Carolina Academy of Trial Lawyers, NCAJ is a nonpartisan association of attorneys, legal assistants, law school students and faculty and law office managers.¹ With more than 3,000 members, it is the third largest trial lawyers association in the nation.

“NCAJ is known across the state and across the country, and we have an incredible ability to impact legislation and policy,” Powers notes. “It is critical that we be involved and knowledgeable. We have a self-sustaining city and feel like we can do it on our own, but we need to make our voice heard.” Indeed, a review of NCAJ’s roster of past presidents reveals that the Triangle is a hot spot for the organization’s leaders, making Powers’ induction unique.

Being something of an outsider is not unusual for Powers, though. Born in Miami, Florida, he spent his growing-up years in several different places: elementary school in Coral Gables, high school in Mukwonago, Wisconsin, college in Minnesota and North Carolina. Powers finished law school at Campbell and found NCAJ – then the Academy of Trial Lawyers – when he was looking for a résumé filler. Powers recalls that as he graduated law school, he didn’t quite grasp what he was stepping into when he signed up as a member.

¹ Full disclosure: the author is chair of the Criminal Defense Section of NCAJ and vice president of Membership.

“At the time, I wasn’t mature enough to understand the importance of what we do. Thankfully, some people in the organization saw something in me and encouraged me along the way. And along that way I made some of my closest friends through all of the social events and CLEs and general fellowship. These are people I still vacation with. Now, however, I recognize that I bring more compassion to my practice because of NCAJ. We make North Carolina a better place for average North Carolinians.”

A self-described “tech geek,” Powers is bringing his signature playfulness and obsession with visual messaging to his presidency. He sends NCAJ board members videos with a hint of humor and offers steady reminders to use technology to effectively communicate. He worked his way up to the presidency through several roles within NCAJ, including vice president of communications and chair of continuing legal education programs.

Powers’ focus as president necessarily shifts as NCAJ responds to developments in the law, to proposed bills and to any issues that arise that may impact its membership and the clients its members serve. Some of his focus, however, is constant. Powers is at-the-ready to drive to Raleigh, make phone calls or sit down for coffee with decision makers and power brokers. He is routinely ensuring consistency in messaging when it comes to addressing any issue. And he endlessly encourages young lawyers to get involved and engaged through social events, networking and educational opportunities that are outside the box.

As Powers reflects on how to use his presidency to inspire more Charlotte-based lawyers to embrace and engage with Raleigh, he references Abraham Lincoln and Henry David Thoreau. “You know,” Powers muses, “if we want to have any relevance to Raleigh in litigation, we can take the Lincoln theory that the system is not perfect but I’m going to go ahead and engage; or, we can be like Thoreau who said I’m going to go buy my own land and do my own thing. As much as we might not like to admit it, the power center of North Carolina has been and continues to be Raleigh. And I choose to engage.”

For Powers, choosing to engage means redefining the relationship lawyers in Charlotte have with power brokers in Raleigh. At the helm of NCAJ, Powers recognizes that he has his work cut out for him as he pushes reluctant litigators to step up and have a say at the capitol. “We are a group that represents people and people’s rights. We all have to speak up if we really want be heard,” Powers said. And if speaking up somehow results in that dream of a four-lane highway to the beach becoming a real, live NC DOT project, maybe that subtle thing between Raleigh and Charlotte will start to smooth its way out as Queen City lawyers see that yes, we can have an impact on Jones Street.