

NJSBA President Robert Hille Offers Advice to Young Lawyers

by Katrina Homel



NJSBA President Robert Hille got his start in the legal profession before even applying for law school.

“I had no connection with the profession at all, but it was something that I always wanted to do. When I was in college, the principal of my high school [went to attorney] Jerry Breslin...who was handling a case for the high school...and suggested that this fellow was really interested in getting into the legal profession,” Hille recounted. “And Jerry Breslin gave me a shot in the summer of my junior year of college. He didn’t tell anyone that I wasn’t in law school, and I was doing interrogatories and deposition summaries, and I sat there with the clerks.”

Hille, a Bergen Catholic High School and Bucknell University alum, went on to attend Seton Hall University School of Law. After law school, Hille clerked for the late Honorable Kevin O’Halloran, later the presiding chancery judge of Bergen County. During his clerkship, Hille had the opportunity to observe great trial attorneys, which had a substantial influence on his later career.

“You see these people in front of you as a law clerk, trying these cases from start to finish, [seeing] the interactions with the juries, watching the evidence being presented—there were complex cases factually, so they required experts—so you really sort of got a full picture of what was going on in a trial,” he said.

Following his clerkship, Hille worked as a firm associate. Hille was interested in trial work early on, and cited that some advice he received early on was instrumental in helping him gain experience in that area. “If you want to get into the courtroom, because I wanted to get into the courtroom and try a case, sign up with work with the public defenders,” Hille said he was advised. “So I did sign up locally with the state public defenders office and did a lot of criminal work there.”

From there, Hille continued to gain experience as a trial lawyer, though not without some tense as well as humorous moments as he sought to make a name for himself as a young lawyer. Hille recounted that he had one case as a young lawyer involving two very experienced trial attorneys in front of the Honorable Garrett Brown Jr., a United States district judge for the District of New Jersey, and later chief judge.

“We were in chambers...and [one attorney] couldn’t remember my name, so he kept saying ‘and him, and him, and him,’ and at one point I said, ‘you know, him has a name,’” Hille shared. “Everyone chuckled and we had a laugh over it. I think they remembered, at least for that case, who I was, but it was a good lesson in humility.”

After working in a firm for some time, Hille went out on his own as a solo practitioner. He stated that one challenge he experienced as a young solo practitioner was making sure that he got paid for his work.

“I think one of the toughest lessons to learn as a solo practitioner who controls their firm dynamic...is understand[ing] what you can give your clients in terms of value in your discussions with the client, whether their expectations are reasonable, and whether you mutually can agree on a compensation that will benefit both—for the client it’s got to be value; for the lawyer it’s got to be enough to divert those resources to that project,” he said. “I think that’s not an easy lesson to learn, and it’s one that you sort of develop over time.”

Hille later went back to work in a firm, and is now a partner in the Morristown office of McElroy, Deutsch, Mulvaney & Carpenter LLP. His practice focuses on healthcare, insurance, and professional liability defense.

Hille related that, “as a young lawyer, all of your lessons are tough. But as a young lawyer, you are best able to bounce off of those lessons.”

“I got a lot of noes in my career and a lot of doors sometimes politely closed, sometimes not so politely closed,” he said. “I think persistence pays off.”

Hille urged young lawyers to find an area of law of strong interest and be open to new opportunities. “You want an area that hopefully is going to grow, expand, or is just healthy. And then you need to learn everything that you can learn about that area, and then you need to be out there as a source and resource for that area,” he said. “In other words, be speaking, be writing, if someone were going to type the word into that practice area, your picture would come up, or would come up as one of the leading experts.”

“That takes time, it’s not going to happen overnight. But the sooner you get started on that pathway, the sooner you’ll be there,” he added.

Throughout his career, Hille was involved in the Bergen County Bar Association and then the NJSBA. He shared that in the early days of his involvement with the Bergen County Bar Association as a young lawyer, he served as chair of the dinner committee, a position that reaped unexpected benefits.

“But what was interesting about it was that one of the tasks was that when we had dinner meetings, you had to register everyone in. The benefit to me was that in that first year, certainly, you always had a couple hundred or so people at that. I got a chance to connect names with faces and meet people I otherwise would never have met in my practice area by checking them in at the door,” he said.

From those early days, Hille took on increasing responsibility in the Bergen County Bar Association, becoming its president, and later on, in the New Jersey State Bar Association, moving up to his current position as NJSBA president.

Hille stated that a key focus of his presidency at the bar association is examining the evolutionary impact of shifts in the practice of law from that of a local nature to a global one.

“I’m trying to change the whole way we’re thinking and looking at things. I’m concerned that the evolutionary forces at work in the profession...are threatening our current model, which is primarily a small business model, a professional business model practice, which recycles resources into the community it serves,” he said. Hille noted that 94 percent of New Jersey law firms are one to five attorney law firms.

“We formed a task force to look at the changing nature of the practice of law,” Hille added. “We have the unauthorized practice committee *ad hoc* committee looking at the outside competition models.”

Hille further stated, “We’re also looking at this idea, the allure of a UBE, standardized testing, portability of admission. The question is, does that really translate to opportunities, or does that create distance and virtual practice models that will compete with the lawyers who are here, and because they can be subject to lower regulatory oversight and more favorable tax treatment, makes them unfairly competitive with what we have now?”

Hille challenged the Young Lawyers Division (YLD) “to motivate its members, and the young lawyers out there, to be part of the NJSBA and the YLD.”

“Ask: Do I see the state bar as important? Is the state bar doing things that I want them to do? Do I know what they’re doing? How are they important to me? How are they not important to me?” he said. The YLD is uniquely positioned to work with the larger state bar to try and zero in on the young lawyer, their troubles, [and] their concerns.”

Though Hille put in a lot of hard work on the way to the presidency of the NJSBA, he also noted that work-life balance is important. “I think the law, as a profession, is a challenge...You take it home with you, you take it on trips with you, ...you’re always going to carry that with you somewhere,” he noted. “But you need to also be able to put it on the shelf at intervals to focus on what’s really important in life, which is not just helping the people who you are entrusted with helping as a professional, but living the life that you’ve been blessed with and the people in it that you’ve been blessed with.”

Despite his demanding schedule and career, Hille has continued to maintain outside interests. He is an avid musician and outdoorsman, and may soon add another accomplishment to his resume—rock musician. Young lawyers should stay tuned to see when they can catch Hille playing with his neighborhood band. ■

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