

# ACCESS TO JUSTICE, WORK/LIFE BALANCE, AND MORE TOMORROW'S BAR LEADERS SOLVING TODAY'S PROBLEMS

BY ADRIAN D. THOMPSON



**A**t the end of last year, I sat down with three young leaders in the Greater Cleveland legal community:

- **Mira Aftim**, Vice-Chair of the CMBA's Young Lawyers section. Mira is an associate in Taft's Compliance, Investigations, and White Collar Defense practice.
- **Vince Scebbi**, Chair of the CMBA's Young Lawyers section. Vince is a personal injury and workers' compensation associate at Nager Romaine Schneiberg (NRS Injury Law).
- **Delanté Thomas**, President of the Norman S. Minor Bar Association, Cleveland's bar association for Black attorneys and legal professionals. He is the Chief Ethics Officer for the City of Cleveland.

My goal was to get a sense of young lawyers' challenges and the solutions these leaders are adopting to meet them. Here's a recap of our conversation:

**Adrian Thompson:** You're coming of professional age at a special time. I'm thinking of the pandemic, of course, but other issues currently impact the profession: things like a greater focus on diversity and inclusion, work/life balance, mental health in the workplace, access to justice and equity for the consumers of our services, technology that is changing the way we practice, and more. What are the most significant issues facing young lawyers — and, more generally, the profession?

**Delanté Thomas:** One of the most critical issues for us at the Norman S. Minor Bar Association is the detrimental impact the pandemic has had on Black and Brown communities. History has shown us that when we as a nation go through something like that, these communities get the worst, and the COVID-19 pandemic is no different. One of the most significant issues we face as a bar association is figuring out how we can be on the front line to support our community. And we, as young lawyers, have to figure out how we balance work and life while showing up for a community that needs us right now, arguably more than ever.

I also think one of the important challenges my generation of lawyers — broadly speaking — faces is balancing the expectations of seasoned lawyers. We have different career objectives and different goals, but right now, the people evaluating our work and professional development practiced much of their careers when 80-hour work weeks were the norm. We don't want that, but that doesn't mean we're less engaged.

**Vince Scebbi:** For me, mental health and work/life balance are so important: if I'm not at 100% mentally, how will I be able to help my clients and go to bat for them? That's critical, and my peers share that concern. We as a profession have to figure out how to ensure that lawyers — young lawyers, of course, but every other lawyer as well — can be on top of their game every time they advocate for their clients.

In addition, we're just beginning to understand how technology is disrupting the practice. We — and our clients — rely on smartphones for so much. I have signed up clients and done depositions from my cell phone. I feel it falls on my generation of lawyers, who grew up with access to the entire known universe of information at our

fingertips, to figure out how to use technology and innovation to improve access to justice and the delivery of legal services.

**Mira Aftim:** Building on what Vince said, work/life balance goes hand in hand with cultural and mentorship issues that have come out of the pandemic. Working from home certainly has its benefits, but it also adds challenges — not just for younger attorneys, but for overall firm culture. Finding the right balance is critical — to ensure attorneys have a good work/life balance but are also present for important mentoring opportunities in the office. And, of course, technology complicates the balance because the more we rely on technology, the harder it is to leave the office behind at the end of the day.

In my view, this culture shift — spending less time in the office because of the pandemic and not being able to build meaningful relationships — can lead to a sense of isolation in lawyers at a point in their careers when having a community is particularly critical to their personal and professional development.

**Thompson:** What are you, as leaders, doing to respond to these challenges?

**Aftim:** As vice-chair of the Young Lawyers section at the CMBA, I focus on enhancing our section membership and coordinating our annual social event. However, in response to these pandemic challenges, another main focus has been maintaining a steady stream of informal social events to reduce the COVID-generated feelings of isolation and help young lawyers expand their professional contacts and referral networks. We've also offered practice-specific CLE programs to better equip our members with the tools and resources they need to develop robust practices.

**Scebbi:** I agree. We graduate, pass the bar, become lawyers, and feel unprepared for the next 30 years of our lives. A strong sense



Mira Aftim



Vince Scebbi



Delanté Thomas

of community helps us understand we're all in this together, we're young and green, but we'll be better lawyers if we work and learn together. As the saying goes, 'a rising tide lifts all boats.' It also helps us tackle, as a group, the big problems facing the profession — diversity and inclusion, access to justice, and the like. Our social events and CLEs — particularly the New Lawyer Bootcamp we're bringing back — foster our community and build connections.

**Thomas:** As I mentioned, one of the biggest challenges for the NSMBA is meeting the legal needs of our community. To that end, we just launched an attorney directory that functions as an online database of lawyers; it can help people find Black and Brown lawyers with experience solving the issues they face. We've also started conversations about partnerships with other organizations, including the Legal Aid Society, Cleveland's NAACP, and others, because they're also getting tons of calls they can't take.

**Thompson:** My last question is about your legacy. How will you judge success when you reflect on your tenure as a leader?

**Scebbi:** There's no easy metric for measuring success, especially in an organization like this, but I hope the things we're doing today serve as building blocks for an even better organization. Overall, my goal is to leave the section in a better place than when I first got involved. As I start to wrap up my time as chair over the next few months, I think we've done that. We've created a stronger community and, equally important, laid the groundwork for that growth to continue.

**Aftim:** I agree with Vince. It is hard to measure, but one metric we could use is membership numbers: how did the membership grow throughout the year, and how actively did our members participate in our events compared to last year? It's not apples to apples because in some years fewer attorneys may graduate from law school, but increases in members and engagement are good indications that we're doing the right things.

**Thomas:** At the NSMBA, we're trying to do the same thing: reconnect with our members and potential membership base. There are a lot more Black and minority attorneys in the Greater Cleveland area than members of our Bar Association, so we're working on ways to get people involved and make sure we have something to offer everyone. We also want to ensure that we have a representative cross-section of the community: lawyers in large firms, solo practitioners, in-house corporations, start-ups, government agencies, non-profits, and community organizations.

**Thompson:** Thank you all for your time and perspective, and best of luck for success in your careers.

*Adrian Thompson is the president of the Cleveland Metropolitan Bar Association and co-partner-in-charge of Taft's Cleveland office. He also serves as Taft's chief diversity officer and is president emeritus of the board of directors of the Legal Aid Society of Cleveland. He has been a CMBA member since 1991. He can be reached at (216) 706-3912 or athompson@taftlaw.com.*

# GOURASH DISPUTE RESOLUTION SERVICES, LLC

MEDIATION/ARBITRATION

**HELPING ADVERSE PARTIES REACH  
COMMON GROUND**

**40 YEARS OF EXPERIENCE**

- Insurance Coverage
- Personal Injury
- Complex Commercial
- Property Damage
- Defamation
- Products Liability

## DANIEL F. GOURASH



(440) 570-1612



dfgourash@gmail.com

