

A Lawyer Who Leads by Example

By Don Sarvey



Thomas G. Wilkinson Jr., 118th president of
the Pennsylvania Bar Association

T

om Wilkinson likes to say he “grew up in the trenches.”

By that he means he has had deep experience with and within the PBA’s committee and section structure and has been heavily engaged in their activities for many years, a background he believes will help him during his term as the 118th president of the PBA, which starts in May at the close of the annual meeting. For one thing, he thinks his experience helps him understand how truly broad and diverse the interests and concerns of the membership are.

Wilkinson has served in the House of Delegates and on the Board of Governors, and he has been a member of the Civil and Equal Rights Committee, the Editorial Committee and the Membership Development Committee, to name a few; he has chaired the Civil Litigation Section and co-chaired the high-profile Task Force on the Interbranch Commission Report on Juvenile Justice. He has served as president of the Pennsylvania Bar Institute. One of the places where he really made a mark was with the Legal Ethics and Professional Responsibility Committee, which he chaired for 11 years and during which he drafted hundreds of ethics opinions. His service in that role earned him major PBA awards, a Special Achievement Award in 1998 and a President’s Award in 2000. He is one of the go-to authorities in legal ethics.

Thomas G. Wilkinson Jr., 55, enjoys hard work. He’s an admitted micromanager. He comes prepared. He’s a red-pen wielder, always on the lookout for something to fix. Yet even as he bears down on details, he doesn’t lose focus on the big picture. And despite a good lawyer’s professional intensity, he’s easy to get along with and always seems to be on an even keel.

Wilkinson grew up in Massachusetts, on Boston’s North Shore, the son of a decorated Korean War bomber pilot who later captained TWA 707s and 747s. His father used to joke

with him that TWA stood for Tom Wilkinson Airlines. His mother, a nurse, died of lung cancer in her 40s. Wilkinson enrolled at the University of New Hampshire with skiing on his mind but discovered his competitors for the school team were Olympic quality. Tennis enthralled him as well (and still does). He majored in political science, got interested in justice issues and flirted with notions of politics or journalism as a career. He did summer work for various North Shore weekly newspapers and also had an internship in Washington, D.C., with U.S. Rep. Ed Markey of Massachusetts. When his interest in justice led him to think about law school, he considered Georgetown, but his college roommate had an extra application for Villanova and one thing led to another. “We visited and really liked the area, and so I enrolled and told Georgetown to remove me from the wait list,” he said.



Photo by Jeff Lyon, Philadelphia Bar Association

Incoming PBA President Tom Wilkinson and wife Kathleen, Philadelphia Bar Association chancellor-elect



The Wilkinson family, from left, Kathleen, Michael, Lauren, Lindsey and Tom

It was at Villanova that Wilkinson met his future wife, Kathleen Yesenko, thanks to alphabetical class seating. “We met the first day and were part of a study group together,” he said. “We started dating in [the] third year of law school and were engaged in 1984 and then married in 1985.” Wilkinson graduated from Villanova in 1981 (he’s an adjunct professor there now). Tom and Kathy Wilkinson form an extraordinary pair in that while Tom is serving as president of the PBA, Kathy will take office (in January) as chancellor of the Philadelphia Bar Association — thus becoming simultaneous husband-and-wife leaders of the two largest bar organizations in the Keystone State. “It may be tough to see each other except at bar events,” he joked. They live in Haverford and have three children, Michael, 13, a seventh-grader; Lauren, 20, a sophomore at Franklin & Marshall; and Lindsey, 21, a Tufts graduate working as a paralegal in Washington, D.C., for her father’s law firm, Cozen O’Connor, while waiting to take the LSAT.

Wilkinson joined Morgan Lewis in 1982. He left in 1991 to join Cozen O’Connor to work on Three Mile Island litigation and has been there since. He is a member of the firm’s commercial litigation group and heads its alternative dispute resolution practice. He is an expert witness

(plaintiff or defense) on professional liability issues involving lawyers — conflicts of interest, disciplinary infractions, standards of practice. He was among the lawyers who worked with the American Civil Liberties Union on *Lozano et al. v. City of Hazleton*, the highly publicized federal suit that overturned the city’s ordinance against hiring or renting to illegal immigrants. He has been listed for eight years in *Super Lawyers*. Martindale-Hubbell has him at AV/Preeminent, the highest rating of excellence, and gives him a 5/5.0 peer rating, the highest, for legal ability.

He arrives as PBA president with some intentions. One of his first steps will be to set up a PBA task force to review amendments to the canons of judicial ethics. He will charge the task force with looking at updates from the American Bar Association’s model code covering, among other items, rules for disclosure of contributions and gifts in judicial campaigns. “The guidelines could be more concrete than they are now,” he says.

Wilkinson sees great potential for improving the PBA’s presence on Capitol Hill in Harrisburg. He said he was excited about the hiring of the PBA’s new director of legislative affairs, Fredrick Cabell Jr., and looks forward to working harder to build better relationships with legislators. “I

believe we can be more effective on the Hill and focus our resources more effectively on the front end of developing legislation that can benefit our members and our clients,” he said. He wants the PBA to get more involved at the legislative committee level, as part of the drafting process, rather than simply taking pro/con positions after legislation has been written. He also likes the idea of focusing legislative visits on one issue at a time. “We’re not going to dilute the message by making pitches for 10 significantly different or unrelated pieces of legislation during one visit.” His says his agenda includes adequate funding to support legal services and pro bono.

Wilkinson is also looking to upgrade the PBA website and use the Web to deepen relationships with county bar associations. He wants to link the PBA website to the county bars “so their members understand that PBA resources are fully available to them. The key is working closely with the county bars.” He cited the Solo and Small Firm Practice Section’s listserv as a “robust” example of how the resources of the Web can be applied. “The discussion on that listserv on a day-to-day basis provides a wide array of practical advice, pointers, suggestions, referrals,” he said. “People who follow that listserv get their full value of membership in a matter of weeks.”

He also wants to build on the diversity initiative begun within the PBA with its Diversity Task Force and the subsequent establishment of the PBA Diversity Team and appointment of Diversity Officer Janis M. Leftridge. “We want to discuss how we can be of help to counties to increase participation among diverse members of the bar. We want to try to generate new members, not just for the PBA but for the county bars.”

It was Gretchen Mundorff who, during her term as PBA president in 2010-11, appointed Wilkinson co-chair of the Task Force on the Interbranch Commission Report on Juvenile Justice. “Tom is so thoughtful and has such a tremendous work ethic — that’s a dynamite combination, and then he sprinkles in his dry wit,” she observed. “That’s going to serve

him well as PBA president. He has earned so much respect and trust.”

Former PBA President Andrew F. Susko was a law school classmate of Wilkinson’s and both served on the editorial committee of the law review at Villanova. “He’s an extraordinarily talented lawyer who’s thoughtful in everything he does,” said Susko. “He’s a good listener. He has a great passion for excellence. Every time he gets involved he brings excellence to what he does. He does not get involved unless he’s totally committed.” In terms of hard work, Susko said that “Tom never asked anyone to do anything he wasn’t willing to do.”

Another former PBA president, H. Robert Fiebach, is Wilkinson’s colleague at Cozen O’Connor and has known him

for more than 20 years. “He really loves the law and loves lawyers,” Fiebach said. “He has a wonderful disposition. He’s even-tempered. I’ve never seen him angry. He’s a top-notch lawyer, someone who can be counted on. Watch what he does. He leads by example.” ♦



Don Sarvey

Don Sarvey is editorial director of *The Pennsylvania Lawyer*.

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