Kathleen D. Wilkinson, the Pennsylvania Bar Association’s 127th president, has committed her career to hard work, civility and professionalism. It is her gracious and poised manner that Wilkinson believes has proven to be her most effective tool as a civil litigator and leader in the organized bar.

Striving to be a consensus builder and effective negotiator, Wilkinson says she “loves being a lawyer,” a passion that grew from her enjoyment of television mysteries and detective stories. Growing up in a small New Jersey town, she knew no women attorneys, and the first time she saw a woman lawyer was in the movie “Adam’s Rib” with Spencer Tracy and Katharine Hepburn. A light bulb went off. She told her father she was going to be a lawyer, and while he supported and encouraged her goals, he told her that she could go to college near home. If after graduating from Kean College she was still interested in attending law school, he would support her decision. Wilkinson majored in political science and secondary education, with an emphasis on U.S. history. She graduated early, summa cum laude, with a dual degree, and applied to law schools while substitute teaching. Villanova University was the first to accept her, and after visiting the campus, she never left the area.
Over a third of her law school classmates were women. “It was also a very nurturing environment, with the ethos that we do our best work with the traditions of the Augustinian founders of the university — serve others, seek justice, do pro bono, give back to the community,” she said. These traditions instilled in her a sense of duty to the legal profession, service to those most in need and a commitment to building greater resources and access to justice.

During her time at Villanova Law School, Wilkinson was a member of the Law Review and worked in the law library. Her law school story includes the life-changing event that occurred on her very first day of class. She met the man who would become her husband, Thomas G. Wilkinson Jr., who would become the PBA’s 2012-13 president.

While at Villanova, Wilkinson completed internships with a federal judge and the Delaware County district attorney’s office. In her third year, she worked part time at Krusen Evans and Byrne in Philadelphia, where she became an associate after passing the bar exam. She joined Wilson Elser Moskowitz Edelman & Dicker LLP when it opened an office in Philadelphia in 1984. A partner since 1990, Wilkinson defends complex cases involving employment, professional liability, construction, products, toxic torts, medical devices and pharmaceutical cases. Wilkinson also serves as a judge pro tem and special master in state and federal courts.

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Kathleen and Tom Wilkinson have balanced their legal careers while raising three children. Son Michael will soon graduate from Tufts University. Daughter Lindsey, also a Villanova Law graduate, is a law clerk for a judge in Montgomery County. Daughter Lauren, a Franklin & Marshall College graduate, works in the executive offices of AmeriHealth Caritas.

Wilkinson’s years of working in the historical area of Philadelphia helped shaped her convictions. “I walked past Independence Hall and the Liberty Bell on a daily basis,” in addition to many other historical buildings. She also has attended many programs at the National Constitution Center. “Philadelphia is where our democracy started with the Declaration of Independence. Not everyone was treated equally. The first words of the Constitution, (which are inscribed on the outside of the center) are ‘We the People,’ but initially that did not include everyone. We just celebrated the 100th anniversary of the 19th Amendment and women’s right to vote. The center has a wonderful display titled ‘How Women Won the Vote,’” Wilkinson said. “We must remember and learn from our history.”

Wilkinson was encouraged to get involved in the Philadelphia Bar Association. Although there were many women in her law school class, there were not that many women attorneys who were practicing in law firms or sitting on the bench.

“I wanted to know other women lawyers. I started getting familiar with the Women in the Profession Committee (WIP) at the Philadelphia Bar Association. They used to have brown bag lunches or breakfasts, and I started volunteering and slowly became more and more active,” she said.

Wilkinson became the WIP program chair, soon was appointed to be a co-chair of the committee and was pregnant with her third child during her second year as co-chair. At the time, most law firms had no maternity policies in place and had very few women partners. Wilkinson began attending WIP meetings at the Pennsylvania Bar Association. Leslie Miller, also a litigator at a Philadelphia firm, was in position to become the PBA’s first woman president. Miller urged Wilkinson to get involved in the PBA WIP. “She (Miller) commented that ‘We need more people with your leadership skills.’ So I made sure to continue showing up. I took that very seriously,” Wilkinson said.

After helping to create and serving as a co-chair of the Philadelphia Bar’s Civil Litigation Section, law partner and dear friend Shelli Fedullo encouraged Wilkinson to run for the Philadelphia Bar Board of Governors and then to run for officer positions. Wilkinson served on the board for 16 years. She became the Philadelphia Bar Association’s 86th chancellor in 2013, the sixth woman to serve in that position.
As chancellor, I took as many opportunities as possible to speak out on important issues affecting lawyers and the judiciary. I attended major functions of the PBA, American Bar Association, and events held by the Montgomery, Delaware, Bucks and Chester county bars. Networking with neighboring bars was a great way to solidify relationships and support each other’s goals, events and activities.

The year she served as chancellor, her husband Tom was PBA president. “We didn’t plan that. It was the first time a husband and wife headed up the two largest bar organizations in Pennsylvania and one of a few times in the United States,” she said. “There were times when we both had to speak out on behalf of the bars we were leading, including times when we both gave testimony before Pennsylvania legislators on issues impacting lawyers and judges.”

Wilkinson continues to be active with the Philadelphia bar and was the 2019 chair of the Federal Courts Committee and the recipient of the Philadelphia Bar Association’s 2019 Sandra Day O’Connor Award, which is presented to a woman attorney who has demonstrated superior legal talent, achieved significant legal accomplishments and has furthered the advancement of women in both the profession and the community.

As Wilkinson continued to raise her hand and volunteer for projects with the PBA, in 2014, Philadelphia bar Chancellor William Fedullo appointed her to be the PBA Zone 1 governor. She also was a member of the PBA Civil Litigation Section executive council, became an officer and moved through the ranks to become chair of the section. While serving as Zone 1 governor, Wilkinson started to think about how she could further serve the PBA and lawyers across the commonwealth.

Wilkinson said there were parallels in her path and PBA Past President Miller’s. “I was immediately drawn to her. She was such a great mentor to many women attorneys and always supportive.”

“She was the first woman president and I’ll be the sixth, just as I was the sixth woman to lead the Philadelphia bar.”

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the work of the WIP, both for the Philadelphia bar and the PBA, is crucial. Friendly with all the other women who are PBA past presidents — Gretchen A. Mundorff, Sara A. Austin, Sharon R. López and Anne N. John — Wilkinson said she learned from each of them. “Gretchen and I share a lot of common interests and experiences. Sara is always willing to share her knowledge and experience. I was chair of Sharon’s Membership Enhancement Blue Ribbon Panel on Millennials, Mothers and Minorities. I always thought civility is so important and plan to continue the work that Anne promoted with the new Civility in the Profession Committee,” she said.

When she served as co-vice chair of the PBA Quality of Life/Balance Committee, Wilkinson helped bring the concept of lawyer wellness into the PBA mainstream. In 2019, her efforts were recognized when she received the PBA Quality of Life/Balance Committee’s C. Dale McClain Quality of Life/Balance Award. She has further raised the profile of lawyer wellness during the COVID-19 pandemic by helping to organize programs such as a succulent planting workshop, chocolate and wine tastings, virtual walks and yoga to help lawyers find ways to reduce stress.

Wilkinson applauds the continuing efforts of sections and committees such as the Solo and Small Firm Section and the COVID-19 Task Force for creating networking opportunities and events. “We continue to think about how we can effectively use technology. Through Zoom, we can even plan family-friendly events. We have to think about using technology and saving time and expense.”

“I firmly believe that you need to take good care of yourself and be happy in order to be an effective lawyer,” she said. Wilkinson and her family particularly value their time in Cape May, New Jersey. “Just walking outside and smelling the ocean is beneficial. We enjoy being with family, friends and doing all the Cape May activities,” she said. She also loves reading, long walks and

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Wilkinson said that meeting Supreme Court Justices Sandra Day O’Connor and Ruth Bader Ginsberg are among the highlights of her career.

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In a profession that “already blurs the lines between the office and personal time, this past year made the working mother’s experiences more complex and challenging. We as a bar association need to ensure our programming is accessible and understanding of the members’ needs.”

Wilkinson said the PBA is uniquely positioned to address disparities not only in access to the legal system, but in what happens beyond the four walls of the courtroom. “We know that women in the profession are promoted at a slower rate than their male counterparts. We know that attorneys of color face even greater challenges. We need to continue as an organization to be committed to equity in the legal profession by addressing these real issues our members and constituents face. As the largest bar association in Pennsylvania, we must continue to promote access to the legal profession by widening our circles. The success of our efforts will be defined by our ability to widen our reach.”

Amplifying the voices of women is something Wilkinson started at a very young age. Growing up in small town in New Jersey, she was the daughter of a high school history teacher and a committed mother. Her upbringing was a modest one, in a small suburban neighborhood. Following a move to a larger town when Wilkinson was in high school, her mother experienced a series of health events that left her permanently disabled. Often remaining home with her sister Denise caring for their mother during this time, Wilkinson found sanctuary in films, books and her own writing on the experiences of women leaders she knew. It was during this time of caregiving that Wilkinson began to understand the vital need to address disparities for people living with disabilities and those who do not have the resources to care for their loved ones while sustaining a career.

“Advancing diversity, inclusion and equity in the profession is the bedrock of the PBA’s mission,” Wilkinson said.

Wilkinson said she is committed to building inclusive networks and bringing more voices into the rooms in which she practices. “I feel we have to continue to work hard in this area and support programs. We can use technology to unite people across sections and committees. I’ve done many programs promoting diversity and will continue this dialogue,” Wilkinson said.

Wilkinson served on the Joint Task Force for Continuity of Delivery of Legal Services created by PBA President David E. Schwager. “At some point, we will go from COVID-19 to what will be the new normal, so we have to think about how it will impact our practices and our clients. We can take advantage of new technologies in a positive way, while recognizing the benefits of in-person interaction as well.” The task force revealed that many counties do not have electronic filing and that litigants do not have the same tools or access to smartphones, computers or the internet. “These disparities need to be addressed so we provide equal access to the courts by all litigants,” Wilkinson said.

Based on the need for connecting with other members during the pandemic,
Wilkinson says membership is more important and of greater value than ever. “Without the PBA and all the Zoom meetings, it is very lonely. You’re just sitting at home with no one to talk to. Most of my friends are lawyers. There’s nothing more refreshing for me than going on a Zoom call and finding out about someone. We refer cases to each other. COVID-19 made me realize that being a PBA member is more important than ever. It has been a tough time for everyone, and a lot of firms have closed. Yet I can still see people in virtual meetings and still network, learn, get my CLEs and even have fun,” she said.

Wilkinson said it is a crucial time to make positive changes. “By late summer and fall, I think we will slowly and safely start to see each other in person again. It will be a year of continuing our good work. I can see myself being heavily involved in helping the PBA to assist its members navigate the new normal effectively.”

“We all need to adapt to using the best of what technology has to offer. Virtual practice seems to be here to stay, as we have shown we are able to get a lot accomplished through the use of such technology,” Wilkinson said. “We are very much looking forward to a blend of in-person and virtual member experiences.” She envisions hybrid ways of doing things, by having socially distanced events, with others participating remotely. She also would like to see a “Back to the Bar” event take place in the fall at an outside venue where members will feel comfortable.

Wilkinson looks forward to the Civility in the Profession Committee initiated by past President Anne John becoming a standing committee. “We need to work to make sure that lawyers are perceived as great role models and speak out about maintaining civility and professionalism in the practice of law and beyond,” she said. “With what everyone has gone through over the last year, these COVID-times have been very difficult. We need to take a deep breath, be kind, patient and courteous in everything we do.”

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Portraits photos at Independence Hall and the National Constitution Center by John Carlano Photography, Philadelphia