The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines a Renaissance man as “a person who has wide interests and is expert in several areas.” But Jay N. Silberblatt is not your ordinary Renaissance man turned association leader.

Sure, Silberblatt, of Silberblatt Mermelstein PC, Pittsburgh, is a seasoned civil litigator. He also has starred in several plays and videos. He wrote a song. Years ago, he learned how to take photos for case documentation. He’s a former Little League baseball coach. He is also an advocate for young lawyers. In the end, however, Silberblatt takes “Renaissance man” to a higher level as a motivated relationship builder and manager.

When he takes office as the 128th president of the Pennsylvania Bar Association in mid-May, Silberblatt hopes to use his many talents to create a more law student- and young lawyer-centered association. “What the PBA has to offer is essential for young lawyers,” he said.
“We really need to incorporate all that we’ve learned during this pandemic into the future of our legal practice and our system of justice.”

A Legal Legacy
Silberblatt recalls helping his father Paul gather on-site case evidence for Paul’s law practice in Clearfield. “He did some insurance defense work for a variety of insurance companies, so he was often trying civil litigation cases in Clearfield and surrounding counties,” Silberblatt said. “I was pretty handy with a camera, and I would often take photographs of the scenes.”

Silberblatt’s first trip to New York City was with his father, when Paul had business there. “He took me with him, and he would always joke that I was his bodyguard,” Silberblatt recalled. “I have this recollection of sitting in the lobby of the Pennsylvania Railroad offices and my dad was off in some conference room, presumably meeting with a bunch of lawyers and businessmen.”

Yet even with these enriching experiences as a youth, the legal profession was not an automatic first choice as a career.

Silberblatt’s paternal grandfather Morris also practiced law. “Although I probably always knew that I was going to practice law, there was a period of time when I resisted it, probably during my teens. I didn’t really consider it a family tradition, and I didn’t want to feel like my path was preordained by the paths taken by my grandfather and my father,” he explained. “So, I would tell myself that I didn’t have to be a lawyer. I had to assert a bit of resistance and independence in order to just push back a little against parental authority. But I never pushed very hard. I always knew, in the back of my mind, that I would go to law school.”
Silberblatt eventually came to the realization that law fit into his talents and abilities, through a combination of factors.

During his second year of law school, “I encountered the most difficult question I had ever faced,” wrote Silberblatt in the Spring 2021 PBA Solo and Small Firm Section newsletter: “It was a question from my dad. He was designing a building for his law firm, and he called to ask: ‘Should we include a room for you?’”

Jay’s older brother, Henry, had already graduated from law school in Oregon and was not returning to Clearfield. “I had to find the courage to tell my dad that I wasn’t coming back either,” Silberblatt wrote. “It was a very emotional admission to make to him, but I had already started interviewing for summer positions for Pittsburgh firms. To this day, I regret not having practiced law with my dad.”

Silberblatt graduated from the University of Pittsburgh Law School in 1980. After graduation, he was hired by Silkov and Love, Pittsburgh, where he had worked as a law clerk. Interestingly, Jay’s grandfather Morris also graduated from the University of Pittsburgh School of Law and began his practice in Pittsburgh.

In 2001, Jay and one of his law partners, Merle K. Mermelstein, left to form their own office. They remained in downtown Pittsburgh for 20 years until they relocated the office last year to the Pittsburgh suburb of Forest Hills. In the Solo and Small Firm Section newsletter, Silberblatt wrote of Mermelstein: “I never had a sister, so Merle has been the next best thing.”

Now his office is situated within walking distance of the home he shares with his wife Lori. They have two grown children, Alec, 31, and Zoe, 29.

Using Theater and the Arts to Teach
Silberblatt indicated that the bulk of the firm’s work is personal injury, but he also handles some commercial litigation and a lot of legal malpractice and ethics consultation. It was some time ago that he decided the best way to convey his messages regarding avoiding malpractice was one that was near to his heart: acting.

Several years ago, Silberblatt performed in a semi-professional production of 12 Angry Men. “I actually hadn’t planned on all of the high school matinees that this theater company had scheduled as part of the run, so three days during the week I was on stage in the afternoon with an audience.
Jay Silberblatt and his wife Lori and their children Zoe and Alec, along with dogs Tobi and Zephyr filled with high school students. After each performance, the members of the cast would have a discussion with the students about the play.

“The play is about the deliberations of a jury,” he said. “The entire play takes place in the jury room. … those 12 men who are deciding the case argue and they bicker and they discuss and they almost come to blows over their verdict. So, it’s an excellent teaching tool for young people to learn about our justice system and the preconceived prejudices and implicit biases that people bring to it.

“Many times, I say if I weren’t a lawyer, I might be an actor,” Silberblatt said. “The work for the PBA Professional Liability Committee has provided me with that outlet.” For the committee, Silberblatt has written a variety of vignettes that depict issues of professional liability for lawyers. The vignettes are recorded and used in PBA avoiding legal malpractice seminars. “We use those little video vignettes as teaching tools to help lawyers avoid the pitfalls of the practice.”

“Jay has provided helpful guidance to many lawyers in the area of malpractice avoidance,” said outgoing PBA President Kathleen D. Wilkinson. “Attorneys respect his thoughtful leadership.”

Both of his children have acted in the video vignettes at times. “And both of my children have careers in the arts,” he said. “It’s a kick to see them perform in a PBA video.”

Silberblatt serves on a wide array of boards, including Squonk Opera, a Pittsburgh.
nonprofit arts organization that creates outdoor musical and theatrical experiences.

Silberblatt also served as a judge/commentator from 1994-98, and again last year, for the annual PBA Statewide High School Mock Trial Competition. About the students who participate in the competition, he said, “They’re so anxious and eager to be critiqued by lawyers who have been there and done that. Part of it is encouraging them to go on and go to law school.”

Silberblatt’s curriculum vitae includes many written items and presentations, ranging from one of the earliest articles discussing how to use the internet effectively to diversity initiatives. “I took to technology at an early time in my career,” he noted. Silberblatt has published articles in the PBA Quarterly and The Pennsylvania Lawyer. “When I have time, I enjoy writing.”

Silberblatt also wrote a song. “I was sitting at home one day a few months ago, and I just had this revelation that I needed to write a song for the PBA Professional Liability Committee. I sat down at my computer, and about 10 minutes later the song was done.” Silberblatt sent it off to his friend John Noble, a lawyer in Westmoreland County. “I asked if he would sing it for me and record it on Zoom so that we could use it at our next PBA Professional Liability Committee program.”

What’s Ahead
Silberblatt served on the PBA COVID-19 Task Force. The PBA has “learned so much in the last two years about how we practice law, how we can practice law and how our courts can function more efficiently,” he said. “We really need to incorporate all that we’ve learned during this pandemic into the future of our legal practice and our system of justice.”

Over virtual meeting spaces, such as Zoom, we are listening and learning a great deal about each other, he said. “Lawyers don’t need to be traveling across the state to present a motion or make an argument in front of a judge when a virtual conference is available and is a reasonable option.”

Silberblatt noted that one challenge is to make sure that there is a unified platform for advanced communication across the state. He said it’s important that all courthouses have high-speed internet access, and that all judges and all lawyers are adequately trained to use that advanced communication technology so that a lawyer’s practice can be cost effective and a judge’s time can be used in an efficient way without sacrificing any of the factors that provide for good justice.

“I’m not suggesting that everything can or should be virtual.” Regarding PBA meetings, he said, “Our committees and our sections have learned that they can transact the business they need to transact and that they can successfully accomplish the work that they need to accomplish in a virtual setting.” He believes, in the end though, that in-person meetings are critical for any association.

Succession and the Next Generation of PBA Members
According to Silberblatt, a focus for PBA in 2022-23 will be on the Disciplinary Board’s emphasis that practicing attorneys have succession plans in place. Several years ago, he wrote and filmed a video vignette at PBA headquarters about the importance of succession planning.

The need for a plan hit home in 1985, when Paul died suddenly at age 61. “He had a thriving law practice in Clearfield,” Silberblatt said. “Following his death, I recall spending weeks at a time at his desk in Clearfield meeting with his clients, reviewing their files and making sure that no balls got dropped, and that whatever
“What the PBA has to offer is essential for young lawyers.”
matters my father was handling for them were concluded in some reasonable way. Some of them, his law partners took over, but many I handled myself. I finished them. Not only was I providing a service to my mother … and to my father’s law partners, who had their own practices, and to my father’s clients, who needed to know that their legal affairs were being handled, but I also found it very therapeutic for myself, as part of the grieving process, to finish the work that my father started.”

Silberblatt also plans more involvement with law students and young lawyers: “A focus will be on law students and getting PBA lawyers into our law schools, in front of law students, as examples of what a lawyer can and should be,” he said. He noted that PBA Solo and Small Firm Section members are actively working with Widener and with Villanova law school students. “They hope to soon begin with Pitt and Duquesne. They teach some practical classes on how to start a law firm and how to manage a practice: the kinds of things the law schools don’t often spend a great deal of time on as part of their curriculums. I would like to see those programs expanded. I’d like to see more PBA lawyers in front of law students throughout the commonwealth. And I think if law students have a chance to see, listen and interact with PBA lawyers, those law students may be more prone to join with us when they graduate law school and become lawyers.”

Silberblatt wants to promote and enhance the work of the PBA Young Lawyers Division. “I think our young lawyers are one of the most vibrant sections of the PBA,” he said. “They are clearly our future. I think one of the best indicators of that is that every year they seem to have a contested election to lead that group of young lawyers. There are clearly a number of young lawyers who are clamoring for the leadership opportunities that are provided by the [YLD].”

Leadership and Relationships

For many years, Silberblatt served on the board of directors of the Jewish Association on Aging and on the advisory committee for the Rauh Jewish History Program and Archives of the Sen. John Heinz History Center. He is a past president of Temple Sinai. In 1988, he became involved in the Forest Hills Cable TV Advisory Committee. More recently, he has become an active member of the Forest Hills Planning Commission.

Silberblatt has hosted several judicial candidate forums for the Allegheny County Court of Common Pleas. This year, he is moderating a series of online conversations with candidates for the 18th Congressional seat being vacated by Congressman Mike Doyle, as well as for the candidates vying for Pennsylvania’s open seat in the U.S. Senate.

Silberblatt is a member of the PBA House of Delegates and is the immediate past chair of the PBA Professional Liability Committee. He also served as chair of the Allegheny County Bar Association Civil Litigation Section. He served on the board and the audit committee of the Pennsylvania Bar Foundation. He is a member of the PBA Minority Bar Committee and was co-chair of the Diversity Summit in 2020. He has been appointed to the Legal Ethics and Professional Responsibility Committee. He is also a member of the CLE Board and a Disciplinary Board hearing committee member.

His ongoing commitments with the organized bar have netted Silberblatt several awards, including PBA Special Achievement awards in 2000 and 2004, and a President’s Award in 2001. “That was a time when the Legislature was really down on lawyers and was looking to enact all sorts of draconian rules and regulations ostensibly to deal with ‘frivolous litigation,’ but that would inhibit our citizens from having access to our civil justice system.
and would unfairly punish lawyers,” he said. “We pushed back on that, and we got the Supreme Court to assist in the creation of some new rules that we were able to present to the Legislature as our reasonable alternative to the pending legislation.”

Reflecting on their service together on the PBA Board and other bar initiatives over the years, outgoing PBA President Wilkinson remarked, “Jay has been an excellent source of support and wisdom. I have appreciated his calm input over the last two-plus years during challenging times.”

Silberblatt hopes his legacy is forging relationships that build lasting friendships.

He recalled a time when he chaired the Temple Sinai Synagogue Renovation Committee. “We had an interview process to determine which architectural firm we would hire to plan the restoration of our beautiful historic mansion that is part of our synagogue complex. I would always conclude each architect interview by asking: If you are selected to be our architect and complete the project, what will you value most about the experience?

“And the best answer I heard was given by the architect who was ultimately awarded the job. He said: ‘I will look back on the work and will be most proud to call you my friend. I’ll want to conclude the project, and my greatest accomplishment will be our friendship.’

“My hope for PBA is kind of similar. I have derived a great deal of satisfaction and enjoyment from getting to know lawyers across the state. My hope would be that, over the next year, I get to know even more lawyers across the state. Then I can look back when I’m done and say, ‘I’ve made a lot of friends, and these will be lasting friendships.’ Lasting memories and lasting friendships.”

Andy Andrews is PBA senior publications editor.


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