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■ NONBILLABLE HOURS ■

Bar Presidents Flourish at Proskauer



PHOTOGRAPH BY DAVID LUBARSKY

Proskauer partners who have headed bar associations include (from left): Michael Cardozo, Edward Brodsky, Bettina Plevan, Martha Gifford, Klaus Eppler and (not shown) Robert Kaufman.

BY MARTIN FOX

ROBERT M. KAUFMAN remembers the standing ovation given Michael A. Cardozo at a partners' meeting earlier this year at Proskauer Rose Goetz & Mendelsohn when it was announced the litigator and sports law specialist had been elected the next president of the Association of the Bar of the City of New York.

There was a touch of *deja vu* for Mr. Kaufman, who had received a similar tribute a decade earlier when he was elected to the same position.

And if they had such an inclination, the Proskauer partners could spend even more time applauding, for the 425-attorney firm can boast four others who are, will be or just were bar association presidents.

The bar leaders are: Klaus Eppler, who will complete his term at the New

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City Bar President's Flourish at Proskauer Rose

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York County Lawyers' Association just days after Mr. Cardozo assumes his post at the City Bar, marking the first time partners from one law firm have simultaneously headed the city's two most prestigious bar associations; Bettina B. Plevan, who in November takes the helm at the Federal Bar Council; Edward Brodsky, president-elect of the American College of Trial Lawyers, with an installation date in late 1997; and Martha E. Gifford, the immediate past president of the New York Women's Bar Association.

Meanwhile, Mr. Kaufman has not remained idle, as he made clear during a recent discussion with his colleagues on what life is like heading a bar association. Last year, he took over as president of the Chicago-based American Judicature Society, which focuses on court administrative and reform matters.

All six emphasized their leadership roles did not unfold by chance, but are the fruit of Proskauer's culture — that public service and professional obligations must not become secondary.

'Important Ingredients'

"We were brought up to feel that bar association and public service activities are important ingredients in the practice of law," asserted Mr. Kaufman, a health and corporate law expert active in a host of nonprofit, community and legal services organizations, much like his five colleagues.

The tradition dates back decades with examples set by the late modern-day leaders of the firm — Joseph M. Proskauer, Alfred J. Rose, Norman Goetz and Walter Mendelsohn.

Mr. Brodsky, a securities and corporate litigator and white-collar de-

fense attorney, became aware of this commitment several years ago when he was discussing moving his practice to Proskauer.

"I told them I was working on some extracurricular stuff," he explained. While some firms might discourage this, he observed, "the firm was interested ... because of that; ... they encouraged you. A very interesting attitude."

A similar experience greeted Ms. Gifford, a special counsel who runs the antitrust practice group, when she joined Proskauer in 1987 after a stint as a trial attorney with the Justice Department's Antitrust Division. While she was president of the Women's Bar Association, she received "terrific" cooperation and support from attorneys and staff that enabled her to keep current with her workload and association responsibilities, she said. Her bar commitments, she estimated, accounted for hundreds of hours over the course of her one-year presidency.

Reaction of Clients

While the time involved in leading a major bar association would appear inevitably to cut into a regular practice, the Proskauer attorneys — to a man and woman — maintained this was not the case. While echoing Ms. Gifford's account of all-out support from colleagues, they noted a surprising development was the reaction of clients, who seemed to enjoy basking in the reflected glory of having their attorneys in high-profile roles.

"Clients are much less upset when you say to them, 'I can't see you, I have to talk to the Mayor,'" remarked Mr. Kaufman. "It's better than having another client come ahead of them."

Mr. Cardozo said he expects to emulate Messrs. Kaufman and Eppler in

the effort expended on association matters, which will require longer hours and working weekends to meet the increased workload. But he sees it as a welcome price to pay, for "the rewards you get are so enormous, you don't care about the hours."

"It's how one defines himself or herself as a lawyer," the next president of the City Bar explained. "If you consider your professional obligations broader than just handling the day-to-day paying clients of the firm, the issues answer themselves, and you always have time for another matter or matters."

Mr. Eppler, a securities partner who described himself as unable to delegate, an affliction familiar to Mr. Cardozo, said this has resulted in his devoting about two-thirds of his time to County Lawyers' Association activities over the past year, while still maintaining his securities law practice.

"I don't believe any client has said, 'Hey, Eppler, why aren't you available?'" he pointed out, crediting his Proskauer colleagues and his cellular phone.

His presidency has encompassed a steady flow of position papers from the board of directors covering a wide range of legislative and legal issues, and Mr. Eppler emphasized he "made it a point to be involved. I spent a lot of time down there. I don't let press releases or reports go out unless I've read them."

Ms. Plevan has been preparing to lead the 1,700-member Federal Bar Council for well over a year as president-elect. It's been so long a tour, she laughed, that she suffers from a "major perception problem — a lot of people think my term is done." She's hoping to finish chairing the Second Circuit's Gender Bias Committee before her installation as president in November.

Ms. Plevan, a partner who practices labor and employment law, estimates her presidency of the Federal Bar Council, a specialized bar with a more limited agenda than the City Bar and County Lawyers, will take about one-fourth of her time, but she doesn't see that as a problem. "I think you can't be reasonably successful in practice and rising to a position of leadership unless you're good at juggling," she said.

Mr. Brodsky, who doesn't become the president of the 4,000-member American College of Trial Lawyers, based in California, for another year and a half, said he already has worked and traveled extensively in conjunction with the college's International Committee.

Mr. Cardozo, who, in response to an inquiry described himself as a first cousin three generations removed from the legendary Benjamin Cardozo, said he preferred not to talk in detail about his City Bar agenda until he becomes president next month, succeeding Barbara Paul Robinson. But one area would be "improving the judicial administration ... I'll be speaking out frequently and loudly on judicial independence."

The rewards of bar leadership are often singular. For Mr. Kaufman, it occurred on his watch in 1988 when the City Bar had a prominent and outspoken role in helping to defeat the Supreme Court nomination of Robert Bork.

"It was incredibly important," Mr. Kaufman emphasized, "because instead of Bork we got [Anthony] Kennedy."