

Meet Chris Morris, 2009-2010 HCBA President

Chris Morris, with Bassford Remele, becomes the president of the Hennepin County Bar Association on July 1, 2009. He talked with Patrick Burns about his background and his goals for the Hennepin County Bar Association.

THL: Congratulations, Chris, on your new position and responsibilities. Tell us about your personal and professional background.

CM: I was raised near Como Park. My dad was a lawyer in St. Paul, so I grew up with some notion of what lawyers did and what law firms were like. I met my wife, Sarah, at the University of Minnesota Law School, and she is now a partner at the Lind, Jensen, Sullivan & Peterson firm here in Minneapolis. We have two children, Eric and Elizabeth.

THL: Where did you go to undergraduate school?

CM: I went to Harvard College, graduating



Patrick R. Burns
Contributing Author

Mr. Burns is a lawyer at Dady & Garner in Minneapolis. He focuses his practice on representation of franchisees, dealers, and distributors. Burns also frequently serves as a neutral in matters warranting pro bono or reduced fee mediator or arbitrator services.

in 1989, and then came back home to the University of Minnesota Law School where I graduated in 1992.

THL: I decided not to attend Harvard. What made you want to go there?

CM: Well, at the time I actually had some degree of reluctance to leave Minnesota. My whole family is from this area, and my grandparents lived on farms in central Minnesota where I spent most of my weekends as a kid. So, it was a big change to go to the Boston area, but I figured that I would try it out and if I didn't like it I could easily transfer to some school closer to home. It was kind of a culture shock to go out there initially, but I ended up really loving it and stayed four years and I'm glad I did.

THL: So, then you went to law school at the U of M. How did you pick the U of M?

CM: I obviously knew about the University of Minnesota, having grown up here. I knew that the law school had a great reputation. I also looked at some east coast schools, but my dad strongly encouraged me to go to the University of Minnesota if I wanted to practice law here, because he had gone to Stanford Law School and then returned to Minnesota to practice law. As a result, he wasn't in a community where he knew many classmates and people from his school. That was good advice because I run into my law school classmates continually in litigating cases and through the bar association. I had a case once where the outside and in-house lawyers on all sides had been law school classmates of mine, which was a lot of fun.

THL: What did you do after law school?

CM: I clerked at the Minnesota Court of Appeals for one year with Judge Gary Crippen, who was originally a district court judge in Worthington and then was appointed by Governor Perpich to the Court of Appeals. He was a wonderful judge to work with and he taught me a lot. It was a great extension of law school in that you were continuing to read cases and analyze and write bench memos and decisions, but under the direct supervision of an experienced judge.

THL: You did that for one year?

CM: One year. I came to Bassford in August 1993. It was then known as Bassford Heckt Lockhart Truesdell & Briggs.

THL: What is the focus of your practice today?

CM: I started out doing a lot of legal malpractice defense work. Our work defending lawyers and others in professional negligence cases started to include more and more claims under consumer protection statutes such as the Fair Debt Collection Practices Act and Fair Credit Reporting Act. That has accelerated over the last decade to the point where now about half of my practice is defending lawyers, financial institutions, and insurance companies in cases involving federal consumer protection claims, often pled as class actions. The other half of my practice is representing parties in an assortment of business disputes—such as unfair competition claims and shareholder disputes.

THL: So does your practice heavily involve arbitration or primarily federal litigation?

CM: In the business dispute side of my practice, we are frequently arbitrating either

through the AAA or what's now known as FINRA or with private arbitrators, as well as litigating in Hennepin County District Court and federal courts.

THL: What do you like most about your practice of law?

CM: I enjoy the variety of cases and clients, and analyzing the interesting legal questions that arise. I feel fortunate to practice in the Twin Cities, because it is normally very easy to get along with opposing counsel, and because we have a group of quality judges who are very much engaged in the motions and the cases that are brought before them. It's also rewarding to be in a position to counsel and advocate for clients who are involved in a process that can be somewhat foreign and stressful to them. The parting send off I often hear from small business and individual clients is, "Thanks, it was great working with you, but I hope I never see you again." But that's as it should be. You hope that the client is able to avoid any future disputes.

THL: Do you have a singular victory or accomplishment professionally?

CM: It's hard to point to any one case as a singular achievement. I guess I feel the same sense of accomplishment whenever—at the resolution of a case—a client feels like they've received good counseling that has seen them through the dispute to a fair resolution. Sometimes that means we have prevailed in a summary judgment motion or at trial, but often that might mean that we haven't litigated the case that far but instead, framed the case for an early resolution. I've never had a client who has settled a case and then come back to me later and said, "Gee, I really wish I hadn't settled that case. I really wish that we had gone to trial." That being said, there are some cases that you just can't settle for a variety of reasons. And those are fun for the lawyers, because arguing summary judgment motions and participating in a trial or arbitration is really what we're trained for as trial lawyers.

THL: Many lawyers are familiar with Bassford Remele; what is something about the firm that makes it unique?



Chris Morris, At-a-Glance

Education:

1992 J.D., University of Minnesota Law School, Minneapolis, Minnesota
1989 B.A., Harvard College, Cambridge, Massachusetts

Professional Employment:

1993-present, Bassford Remele
1992-1993, State of Minnesota, Minnesota Court of Appeals,
The Hon. Gary L. Crippen, Law Clerk

Bar Admissions:

U.S. Supreme Court; Eighth Circuit Court of Appeals, U.S. District Courts for the District of Minnesota, District of North Dakota, District of Nebraska, Eastern District of Arkansas, District of Colorado, Eastern District of Wisconsin, Western District of Wisconsin, State of North Dakota, State of Minnesota

Professional Affiliations:

President-Elect, 2008-2009; Treasurer, 2007-2008; Secretary, 2006-2007
Hennepin County Bar Association
Board Member, Hennepin County Bar Association, 2000-2004
Co-chair, HCBA Professional Conduct Committee, 2000 - 2005
Chair, HCBA Finance and Planning Committee, 2005 - 2006
Investigator, Fourth District Ethics Committee, 2005 - 2008
Member, Minnesota State Bar Association
Member, Federal Bar Association (Minnesota Chapter)
Member, Association of the Bar of the United States Court of Appeals, Eighth Circuit
Member, Minnesota Defense Lawyers Association
Certified Instructor, North Dakota State Chair, ACA International Members
Attorney Program
Member, Minnesota Telecom Alliance

Civic Involvement:

Volunteer Lawyer's Network, Board Member Harvard Club of Minnesota, Past President Harvard Alumni Association, Past Regional Director for the North Central States

Personal:

Chris and his wife, Sarah, have two children, Elizabeth and Eric. His interests are coaching youth sports, fishing, and golf.

CM: It's a very enjoyable place to work because the lawyers and staff really support one another, and it's probably closer knit than most law firms of our size simply because we are a boutique in that all we do is civil litigation. I also think we are unique in the frequency that we're able to take cases to trial.

THL: Tell us about your hobbies or interests outside of work.

CM: During law school, golf was my main hobby. That's really taken a back seat since having kids, but I've made headway in one of my life goals which is to convince my kids that golf is great

fun, so, actually tonight, they've each got a golf lesson that I'm taking them to and they've shown a fair amount of interest and some ability to hit the golf ball, even at their ages: 7 and 9. Hopefully that will continue. Sarah has played golf since she was a kid. We took a spring break trip to Florida this year and for the first time we had a family foursome on a par three course. So hopefully golf will come back to being a major hobby. I've also gotten back into fishing, which was a big focus of my childhood, because the kids and I enjoy that. Other than that, my main current hobby is coaching youth sports.

THL: How did you get involved with the HCBA?

CM: I'm not sure if anyone specifically invited me to become involved. I definitely had an awareness that other senior lawyers in our law firm were involved and had been involved, such as Lew Remele and Fred Finch, who are both past presidents of the HCBA. And I think lawyers from the firm who are now deceased had been presidents and heavily involved in the HCBA as well. I was interested in professionalism issues and

so I joined the Professionalism Committee. I ended up serving as co-chair of that committee for a number of years.

THL: What year did your involvement start?



Chris, his wife Sarah, daughter Elizabeth, and son Eric, on vacation at Marco Island, Florida.

CM: That started sometime in the mid- to late-90s. Later, I served a few years in the 4th District Ethics Committee. About four years ago the then-president of the HCBA, Marlene Garvis, appointed me to chair the Finance and Planning Committee. And that was a great opportunity because that was a year in which the association had to create a new five-

year strategic plan. The committee's work that year didn't just involve that year's budget, but also involved a lot of serious thinking about what programs were working, what were not, what programs correlated most closely with the mission of the association, and where we should devote our resources in the next five years. We interviewed leaders of the bar association to gather data, and we ended up with a new long-range plan that we've been working under ever since I became an officer. I really didn't have a good understanding of all the things that the association does until I finished that year as chair of the Finance and Planning Committee. So, at that point, I felt comfortable enough to apply for the secretary position, which puts you on the ladder to becoming president, and was fortunate enough to have the Nominating Committee and board select me as secretary. And I'm still learning about all the things our association does.

THL: So, obviously, this is a very time-involved and serious commitment. How has it been fulfilling to you personally and professionally?

CM: First of all, it's a great opportunity to get to know and work with our judges as well as lawyers in Hennepin County, some of whom are in positions that I wouldn't otherwise come in contact with, such as those handling family law issues and transactional lawyers. I do see many lawyers in town both in work with the HCBA and in the course of litigating cases, but it makes it a whole lot more fun when you're not just seeing lawyers at a motion hearing or in a deposition as opposing counsel. Rather, you actually get a chance to work cooperatively with them to benefit the Hennepin County bench and bar as a whole. It makes life easier as a litigator. The better relationship you have with the opposing counsel, the easier and less stressful your life will be as a litigator and the better you'll be able to serve your client as well, because clients are not served by bickering. That goes back to the reason I originally became active in the HCBA—my interest in promoting professionalism and civility.

THL: It is harder to bicker with somebody you know.

CM: And it's very hard to bicker if I'm going to see that person at a Fourth District Ethics Committee hearing the next day or if I'm going to be meeting with that person to work together on lobbying the state Legislature for better judicial funding for Hennepin County courts. It's going to change the nature of the conversation if I'm able to say "how's Stevie doing in baseball" because I know the lawyer that well. That in itself is a reason to attend HCBA events.

THL: Well, maybe that's a good lead-in to sharing your goals for the HCBA during your year as president.

CM: One of the things I've learned from participating in this bar association and visiting with other bar leaders around the country is that it's very hard to predict what your attention is going to have to be focused on in the upcoming year, because things are going to crop up in the Legislature or in the courts that are going to be a surprise. But there are a few things I'm fairly certain will be a focus of the upcoming year.

One is seeing through a pro bono project developed under Mary Vasaly's leadership. The HCBA has authored a model pro bono policy, because we recognize that smaller to midsize firms may not have adopted formal policies and may not be able to have someone full-time dedicated to coordinating pro bono. What we're trying to do is make it easier for firms and in-house legal departments by making available a template policy.

Second, judicial funding. I have no doubt that it's going to continue to be an issue to deal with over the next year simply because there are going to be budget cuts. The bench is going to have to figure out where to cut among its workforce and activities, and the bar association will continue to work closely with the bench to find ways that law firms in Hennepin County can help ease the caseload and the crunch that the Hennepin County court is going to experience.

Third, the issue of judicial selection is going to continue to be an issue. There was good headway made this year in adopting the goals of the Quie Commission Majority Report into a bill that would allow a vote on a constitutional amendment in 2010, but it ran out of time in the House. The HCBA has resolved to support that bill, so the leadership of the HCBA will be working hard next legislative session and even before that to continue to push on judicial selection reform.

Finally, the HCBA has been working very hard for a number of years on what's come to be known as the Call For Justice. United Way has an existing three digit number, 2-1-1, that's used by the community to find assistance in legal matters and other things, as well. What we have in mind is to provide staffing to respond to those calls and coordinate the provision of legal services, because the Twin Cities has never had a centralized place someone in financial need can go for referral to the appropriate legal service agency.

THL: So the HCBA is partnering with United Way in that regard?

CM: Yes, it is a partnership with United Way, but it's also a partnership between

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the Hennepin County Bar Foundation and the Ramsey County Bar Foundation, which have recently approved a set of incorporation documents creating a nonprofit limited liability company, named Call For Justice. We'll be filing those articles of incorporation soon and will also send the IRS a request for tax-exempt status. That will then enable Call For Justice to begin accepting tax-deductible contributions. The Hennepin County Bar Foundation and the Ramsey County Bar Foundation have further agreed to fund Call For Justice at an amount of \$250,000 jointly, which will be paid pro rata, based on the relative size of the bar associations. But that \$250,000 will be made available only after Call For Justice has raised funds or commitments for a matching \$250,000 from elsewhere in the corporate and legal community. We will be trying to raise these funds from new sources, because we do not wish to divert existing funding that is badly needed by Legal Aid, Volunteer Lawyers Network, and others.

THL: Who will run Call For Justice?

CM: The board will include the executive directors of the Hennepin County Bar Association and the Ramsey County Bar Association, and others who will be appointed by the boards of the two bar foundations, with equal representation between the two. No employee will be hired unless and until the matching \$250,000 has been raised. Tom Fraser has agreed to chair the fundraising committee for Call For Justice. He's been extremely involved in the whole process over the last three years. Many others in Hennepin County have been involved as well, including our past president, Mike Unger, who has been keeping our foundation board up to date on progress.

THL: Is this something that was generated from within the HCBA?

CM: While the issues have been discussed for a number of years in the legal services community, I believe the idea for this project

was germinated about three years ago in the Advisory Board to the Affiliation Agreement. This board is made up of representatives from VLN, the HCBA, and the Hennepin County Bar Foundation, but Ramsey County bar leaders quickly joined in the planning efforts once the idea was formulated. The Call For Justice project is a good example of the kind of long-term commitment bar associations have to make, because meaningful projects can't usually be accomplished during one president's 12-month term. Call For Justice and judicial selection reform are projects that HCBA presidents and leaders have been working on for a number of years, and we're still not there, so it's going to require a lot of effort and attention this bar year. I hope that during my year, we can follow through on the hard work of our predecessors.

THL: So then you're volunteering to stay on as president for another year or two to accomplish all of these things?

CM: No. In less than a year I'll be a lame duck and I will be happy to attain the title of past president. And the good news is we have excellent leadership coming up the ladder. Courtney Ward-Reichard has a tremendous amount of experience with the HCBA and our foundation, and I will pass her the gavel next year. She will be followed by Jewelie Grape and Tom Jensen, who have also been great leaders in the HCBA.

THL: What do you think are the most significant challenges facing the bench and bar in Minnesota currently?

CM: The immediate challenge is the economy and funding situation that is jeopardizing the ability of the Hennepin County District Court to fully function. It also poses great challenges to legal service providers and public defenders. The situation is even worse in Hennepin County than in other counties around the state because we do not receive funding that is equal on a per capita basis with other counties. And that creates very serious problems for all citizens of Hennepin County that perhaps the Legislature and governor do not fully realize. Depending on how deep the budget cuts go, the Hennepin County Court may have to go out of the business of handling



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Chris Morris
on his induction
as president of the
Hennepin County
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certain types of criminal and civil disputes entirely. Continued underfunding of the judiciary, and particularly of the Hennepin County District Court, has the potential to seriously impact everyone in Hennepin County. How do you resolve the petty neighborhood crime situations? Are we going to have to rely on our own communities to appoint old-fashioned justices of the peace? If our clients can't get their civil disputes resolved in Hennepin County District Court, we are going to have to find means to privately arbitrate matters and we will end up with fewer court decisions that form legal precedent, and there will be reduced access to justice because the parties need to pay private arbitrators. And not everyone can afford that.

The other thing that may be less immediate, but right on the horizon, is the problem of partisan elections ruining judicial independence. When you see what's happened in other states, such as in Wisconsin, where you have sitting judges and challengers raising huge amounts of money supported

by partisan political parties or special interest groups, you know the problem is coming to Minnesota. It already has to some extent. That, to me, is a huge problem for our state in the near and long term. I think we all realize politics can never be entirely removed from the judicial selection process, but we have an opportunity in 2010 to take a huge step in avoiding the problems experienced in other states, and that is why the HCBA resolved to support the reforms recommended in the Quie Commission Majority Report. I will do all I can in the next year to help achieve that reform.

THL: Tell us something that very few people know about you.

CM: I guess this would be unusual, even in Minnesota, that at one point in time, I was somewhat proficient in speaking Swedish.


THL: What happened?

CM: It's gotten rusty. I had grandparents who spoke Swedish. Harvard teaches a

huge variety of foreign languages, including Swedish, which I thought would be fun to take, and it did make my grandparents happy to receive correspondence from me in Swedish while I was in college. I, and about six other people, mostly from Minnesota, made up the Swedish class at Harvard College while I was there.

THL: Last question, favorite current read or favorite book and favorite movie.

CM: Let's see, I'm going to say my favorite movie is *Hoosiers*, although *Caddyshack* is close. The best book I have read in the past few years is *Freakonomics*, which was written by a college classmate, Steve Levitt. But my favorite all-time is probably *Golf in the Kingdom* by Michael Murphy.

THL: Chris, thank you for your service to our profession. We all wish you the best of luck in this adventure. 

Please join us in thanking
our Partner

Mary Vasaly

for her service this past year as
President
of the 8500-member
Hennepin County Bar Association.

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