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## Pioneering a new path

### Cornelius becomes ISBA's 140th president, 1st African-American to lead organization

BY LAURAANN WOOD

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"I think ultimately, pioneers are remembered for how they impacted the landscape, and much less for whether or not they were the first ones to arrive," said Vincent F. Cornelius, who became the first African-American president of the Illinois State Bar Association in its nearly 140-year history when he was sworn into office Friday. "With that said ... I think it is a tremendous opportunity for me to pave a new path."

The Joliet-based attorney, who took the reigns of the ISBA during the organization's annual meeting last week, said that while the significance of the organizational milestone is not lost on him, he looks forward to making contributions that will benefit both longtime and newer members of the association. He also said he plans to spend much of his year on top focusing on those who are coming in at the bottom — law students.

Cornelius, who began his trajectory to the presidency after being elected as third vice president in May 2013, said although the responsibilities tied to his new position can sometimes seem overwhelming, he is thankful and excited for his role in propelling the association through another year.

"It's a tremendous honor, especially to know that you are elected by your fellow members of the Illinois State Bar Association," he said. "I am really excited about the opportunities that are out in front of us right now and what the future holds for our association."

Cornelius, principal at the Law Offices of Vincent F. Cornelius, graduated from the Northern



**New Illinois State Bar Association President Vincent F. Cornelius, well known for his frequent sporting of bow ties, shows off the newest addition to his collection: a tie in the three colors of the Italian flag. Umberto S. Davi, the group's immediate past president and a Sicily native, presented Cornelius with the gift during an installation ceremony Friday in Rosemont.** *Ralph Greenstade*

Illinois University College of Law in 1989 and has since maintained a close relationship with his alma mater. He established a minority reception in 2004 to connect NIU Law's minority alumni and engage current and prospective students, and the school has hosted it every year since.

"This has grown into a major event for us (in terms of) size and the networking that occurs," said Mark W. Cordes, a professor and past interim dean at NIU's law school. "(Cornelius) has continued to play a very vital role in the life of the law school."

Illinois Supreme Court Justice Thomas L. Kilbride said Cornelius' roots in solo and small practice help him connect with many other ISBA members, as solo and small-practice lawyers make up a large portion of the group's membership.

"I think that's one of the key

things that really stands out in his profile to be a voice for the Illinois lawyers," Kilbride said. "And he knows how to work collaboratively with other lawyers and other law groups and law firms."

ISBA past president Jack Carey met Cornelius while he was serving his first of two stints on the board of governors, which began in 1999.

Carey, whose term ran from 2008 into 2009, said although the two met by chance when he picked an open seat next to Cornelius, he quickly realized they shared similar legal sensitivities and the two "just clicked."

"It was so easy, so matter of fact, so comfortable that he and I became simpatico since then," Carey said. "When he told me he was thinking about running for third vice president, I said, 'I couldn't be more proud to support you, and I know you will

do a great job.'"

The association is getting a leader this year whose social approach and tone of voice makes him an effective communicator, Carey said.

"He can talk one-on-one, or he can talk in a group, and you know that he is sincere," Carey said. "His comments are well thought out, and there will be no flimflam with him."

While diversity and inclusion and enhanced continuing legal education courses will share some of Cornelius' attention through the year, he said a large part of his presidency will focus on catering to the needs of young and new lawyers who are entering the field as well as the association.

He said he will use his presidency to implement ways to address reports from task forces that revealed students are emerging from law school with a lot of

debt and not a lot of readiness to practice.

“And while that’s always been true of all of us — no lawyer emerges from law school ready to practice like he’s been seasoned 10 or 15 years — at the end of the day, we want to help law schools to prepare law students to transition into the practice as ready as possible,” he said.

One way he hopes to achieve that goal is by establishing a

council of law school deans who will find opportunities to help young lawyers obtain jobs, find mentors and transition into the practice of law.

Harold J. Krent, the dean of IIT Chicago-Kent College of Law, and Jennifer Rosato, the dean of DePaul University’s College of Law, have agreed to chair the council, Cornelius said.

“I anticipate that all Illinois law schools will participate, and hope-

fully we’ll even include a couple of the Indiana law schools and a couple of Missouri law schools who have a lot of students who graduate and come to practice in the state of Illinois,” he said. “I’m looking forward to getting back into the law schools and engaging in orientations, and I’m looking forward to the leadership of law schools beginning to liaison with the deans and the law students and the like.”

But no matter what goals Cornelius’ eyes are set on through his year as president, Carey has no doubt they will be achieved.

“If Vince says, ‘I want to go from spot A to spot B,’ he will get us from spot A to spot B,” Carey said. “His sincerity is followed up by action, and his sincerity is followed up by dedication. So if Vince says, ‘This is where we ought to go,’ we’ll get there.”