



A Small-Town Attorney With Big Goals

Charlie Willman Outlines His Vision for the CBA

BY HALEY HEMEN

Charlie Willman, who begins his term as CBA president this July, recalls a moment when he was serving on the Greater Colorado Task Force in 2023 and one of his fellow members urged him to apply for a senior vice president position. The goal of the task force had been to visit local bar leaders in the less populated areas of Colorado and assess the specific needs of the legal community there. This was something Willman had first-hand knowledge of, since he started his legal career in the smaller communities of Littleton and Glenwood Springs.

The task force brought to light the concept of “legal deserts,” areas of the state that were “in dire need of new lawyers who were willing to practice, as I had done, in a small community meeting the varied needs of its residents,” Willman says. “There was a lack of qualified candidates for judge and prosecuting attorney positions. Many long-time attorneys were retiring, and often there was no one to replace them.”

So, Willman applied for the position. “I was starting my retirement and felt it was time to return to the association that provided me the tools I relied upon in my practice.”

Back to the Beginning

Willman’s small-town roots perhaps shed some light on his decision to take on a leadership role with an eye to the needs of smaller communities. He grew up in north central Illinois, in a community that served as the regional center for the surrounding farm families. When he decided he wanted to become a lawyer, he set out to find a law school that would give him training beyond the classroom education, through hands-on programming and clinics. “As a child of the sixties, I wanted to become involved in community programs that taught me more than traditional classes. I wanted to be involved in government in some way, too.”

This desire for experienced-based learning led Willman to the University of Denver Sturm College of Law, where he participated initially in the school’s Student Defender Program and later its Juvenile Law Program. Through both programs, Willman was able to represent clients in court with attorney staff supervision, gaining valuable hands-on experience. Additionally, he found an invaluable mentor through the Juvenile Law Program: “I was able to learn and craft my trial skills under the guidance of John Baker, who has now served the CBA, the DBA, and the Colorado Judicial Department in various leadership roles,” he explains. “I now fully appreciate him as a role model and my mentor for representing clients who otherwise would not receive adequate or any legal representation.”

When Willman graduated and passed the bar in 2005, he was offered an opportunity and an office by the attorney he had been clerking for in Littleton. “His practice handled a combination of criminal, family, and bankruptcy matters,” Willman says. Then, in the spring of 2006, a good friend of Willman’s from the Student Defender Program told him about an opportunity to practice family and criminal law in Glenwood Springs. “I interviewed in early May and was hired and moved there that same month.” The following year, in June 2007, Willman decided to open up his own office, entering into a contract to provide legal services through Colorado Rural Legal Services. The cases he saw there mostly involved domestic violence, before the concept of emotional domestic violence was really understood.



"I quickly learned, first in Littleton and then in Glenwood Springs, that the practice of law was nothing like I thought it would be in law school. My relationship with the attorney in Glenwood Springs was not a supportive one, but luckily for me, another solo practitioner mentored me and was there to guide me not only in the practice, but later in the business aspect of having one's own office." Willman says he's been fortunate to be the recipient of much advice and assistance over the years, with the standout wisdom being that of basic respect, for others and for the demands of the job: "What I learned and what I now tell others is to treat opposing sides with respect even if you do not think they do the same to you. Be prepared and expect to spend two to three times longer preparing for a hearing or trial than the trial will take."

CBA Leadership and Presidency

When the topic turns to his impending presidency, Willman recounts that it was a given that he would join the CBA upon graduating from law school. But, he says, it was hard for him to be as active in the organization as he would have liked, given that his practice was so far outside the metro area. "Almost all meetings were in



Denver, and there were no Zoom options," he explains. But, in 2009, opportunities opened up for him when he was accepted into the CBA's leadership program, known as COBALT. "I saw this as a way to become reengaged with the CBA and to hone my existing leadership skills."

Willman took another big step toward the CBA presidency in 2020 when he decided to join the Greater Colorado Task Force to help address

1 Charlie (far right) during an RV trip in Bryce Canyon National Park with son Zac and brother Gary.

2 Grandson Leo discovering treasures along the Colorado River.

3 Grandson Henry learning to walk.

the needs of Greater Colorado communities. At this point, being outside Denver wasn't as much of a challenge: "COVID struck, and most of our meetings were conducted using this new innovation called Zoom."

His work on the task force, coupled with his own experience working in those same smaller communities, helped Willman identify several key priorities for his presidential term: unifying the membership, reorganizing its structure, and providing access to justice for all Coloradans. Willman is sure to underscore the importance of the third objective: "This access must remain at the forefront."

Willman also stresses the significance of the CBA as a voluntary bar, which means that membership isn't required to practice law in Colorado. "The CBA needs to reach out to the younger lawyers and those newly admitted to the practice and find ways to make membership relevant and helpful to them." One CBA benefit



Charlie's daughter Caroline with grandchildren Leo, Nolan, and Henry.

that he found essential as a new lawyer was having access to a free legal research platform: "This is a very cost-effective tool needed by most small firms and solo practitioners." He also highlights the CBA-CLE's continuing legal education offerings, which he says have been invaluable to maintaining and improving his legal knowledge base. And, he adds, "Although I have a good time-tracking and billing system, I have begun to review Smokeball, the new system offered as a CBA benefit. This tool at no cost is something many small firms and solo practitioners will use."

Ultimately, Willman states, "my goal is to show that the CBA leadership is receptive to the needs of all members. New bylaws and a new structure for the CBA need to be examined. The current structure does not provide for what I believe is needed, which is a small but diverse board of directors to run the organization like the large nonprofit organization that it is."

Willman also cautions that the CBA is likely to face adverse actions or attempts to move the CBA away from its mission statement:

We are an association that advances members' practice, supports the justice system, and enriches our community. The [CBA] values its diverse membership and our communities. We are committed to the eradication of racism, discrimination, and any other form of injustice against underrepresented groups. We promote diversity, equity, inclusion and the removal of barriers to success within the CBA and the communities we serve.

Willman takes this mission very seriously. "We need to reach out to our members and support our judiciary and the rule of law now more than ever. I know there are differing views in different parts of the state on how best to achieve this, and I welcome all points of view as we move the CBA forward."

In terms of the legal deserts, Willman notes that while tools like Zoom and Webex have made it easier for those who cannot afford to travel long distances to meet with attorneys and access the court system, there is much more work to be done. "The recently enacted statute creating the Equal Access Authority and funding this through a dedicated court docket fee may help provide better representation for those who cannot afford a lawyer, but this also is only one additional resource. The CBA needs to continue to promote and support access to justice." Specifically, Willman would like to see the CBA leadership and the state's two law schools working together to provide financial incentives to encourage law students and young lawyers to locate to rural areas where legal deserts exist. "I hope to work with these entities as well as the Access to Justice Commission to continue to find new ways to improve access to local lawyers in all areas of the state," he says.

At some point I adopted the philosophy taken from something in a book I had read, which was “to touch every raindrop and leave it fuller for the passing.” In some ways that is what I hope I have done for and will continue to do with the people and organizations in my life.

Beyond the Bar

The sense of mission that suffuses Willman’s approach to his presidency also extends to his personal life, where his family is his greatest joy. “My kids are my legacy. Hopefully a good one. I have four adopted children, two sons and two daughters. I have a son who is disabled and is almost never without a smile and loves to hop on my raft.” Willman is an accomplished rafter. “Although rowing my raft is more difficult at my age, I still love it,” he says. “The quiet and challenge of the river is always there. I had the opportunity to row down the Colorado through the Grand Canyon on two different occasions, and those memories will always stand out, along with the many trips down the Salmon and Green Rivers.”

Willman’s other son is finding his leadership role in heavy construction, and his older daughter is an attorney in New York and moving up the ranks in a large corporation’s legal



Charlie’s daughter Abby, son-in-law Dan, and grandchildren Emilia, Eloise, and Everett.

team. His younger daughter is a dedicated mother and homemaker. Adds Willman, “I am also blessed with eight grandchildren who sometimes think I am funny and fun to be with. I hope that each one finds their lives as enriched, fulfilled, and complete as mine has been.”

They certainly have a good example in Willman, who, in addition to his leadership role with the CBA, has always been committed to volunteering. “This is part of my need to give

back to my local community and to the legal community for all that it has provided me and my family. I especially enjoyed coaching mock trial and helping young people develop critical thinking and public speaking skills. At some point I adopted the philosophy taken from something in a book I had read which was ‘to touch every raindrop and leave it fuller for the passing.’ In some ways that is what I hope I have done for and will continue to do with the people and organizations in my life.” **CL**