

O'CONNOR, GRANT CHOSEN TO LEAD NEBRASKA BAR

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When Bob O'Connor and Jack Grant met at Creighton Law School following service in World War II, neither man could possibly know that their respective sons would, a half century later, become presidents of the Nebraska State Bar Association.

Bob—Robert E. O'Connor, Sr.—and Jack—John T. Grant—both graduated in the class of 1950 and began distinguished careers in Omaha. Jack had been in the Army in Australia and the Philippines. Bob flew B-24s.

Jack later served as president of the Omaha Bar Association and became a district judge in Omaha's Fourth Judicial District. He was appointed to the Nebraska Supreme Court by Gov. Bob Kerrey in 1983, and served until his retirement ten years later.

Bob served as a deputy county attorney in Omaha and then entered private practice, specializing in aviation accidents and labor relations until his death in 1982. He served on the Omaha Airport Authority and was elected to the NSBA House of Delegates in 1973.

In October, 2001, young Robert O'Connor, a Creighton grad in the class of 1974, was formally inaugurated as President of the Nebraska Bar Association. His long-time friend and one-time associate in the practice, John Paul Grant, (J.D. '76) was chosen by the Executive Council of the NSBA to be President-elect designate. Following O'Connor's term, Grant will become President-elect, and will be elevated to President in 2003.

It's not that Creighton lawyers have not served the bar association as its chief executive many times in the past. When the NSBA was still in its infancy, Timothy J. Mahoney, first dean of the law school (founded in 1904), was elected president in 1907.

Creighton had just graduated its first law class—six members—the previous year.

In recent years, Amy Longo of Omaha, a 1979 graduate, became the first woman to serve as NSBA President. She was the first woman chair of the House of Delegates in 1996.

Howard Olsen of Scottsbluff (J.D. '68), John Brownrigg of Omaha (J.D. '74), Senior United States District Judge Lyle Strom of Omaha (J.D.

'53) and Harold Rock of Omaha (J.D. '59) also served as bar leader within the past two decades.

The House of Delegates—the “Legislature” or policy making body of the bar—has been chaired by a Creightonian eight times in the last 20 years, and is currently headed by Bob Rossiter of Omaha (J.D. '81). His law partner, Danene Tushar (J.D. '86), has just been elected to the Executive Council, replacing Judy Schweikart of Omaha (J.D. '80) whose term had ended.

Careers Include Public, Bar Service

In O'Connor and Grant (the younger) a lot of stars have crossed, in addition to the fact that their fathers studied together some fifty years before these men rose to the presidency.

Few people realize, for example, that John P. Grant's first job following admission to the bar was with the elder O'Connor's law firm, Ross and O'Connor, where the next person up in the pecking order was the young Bob O'Connor.

Grant left private practice in 1983 to serve as counsel for the Nebraska State Department of Insurance. He worked first for the late Michael Dugan (J.D. '62), who was appointed Insurance Commissioner by Gov. Kerrey. He continued to work with William McCartney (J.D. '76), the next Insurance chief, and a classmate from Creighton.

Grant's private practice back in Omaha has included service as a special prosecutor. He was

CONTINUED ON PAGE 12

O'CONNOR, GRANT CHOSEN

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 11

appointed to carry out that duty by the District Court of Douglas County.

O'Connor stayed with his dad and took over the practice after his death. He shared his father's enthusiasm for flight and his passion for representing plaintiffs in injury litigation and workers in labor negotiations.

Both men grew up with fathers who instilled in them the importance of service to the community and the profession. Both chief executives have served in the House of Delegates and in a variety of significant committee assignments of the local and state bar associations.

"My dad was always respected for his skills as a lawyer. Attorneys knew of him as a mentor," O'Connor said.

Grant added, "Both of our fathers taught us that membership in the profession is an honor and a privilege. I think that's why Bob and I have always been involved in the Omaha Bar Association as well as the NSBA."

Service as President of the NSBA requires personal sacrifices, time away from the practice and time away from the family.

Bob Mullin, who has recently moved to Omaha after several years as a trial lawyer in Scottsbluff, Nebraska, served as NSBA President immediately before O'Connor. He noted that during the cycle of his term (beginning as President-elect designate and ending with the handing of the gavel to O'Connor) he put close to 100,000 miles on his car, traveling to every corner of the state.

O'Connor owns and flies a Piper Saratoga aircraft which he has already flown all over Nebraska as President-elect. "I started flying as a kid and got

my license in 1976," he said, noting that, for his late father, flying was "golf and football and every pastime a person could love."

Nebraska Bar Association

The lawyers of the state formed the Nebraska State Bar Association in January, 1900, in Lincoln. Though there had been a loose alliance of professionals before that time, the new group was thought to be beneficial to both the people of the state and the attorneys. It could help in the education of the profession and in the structure and reform of the courts.

The first annual meeting was held in Lincoln at the Supreme Court chamber of the old Capitol just a year later. A relatively small number of lawyers belonged at that time. One hundred fifty-eight formed the original association and another 35 became members in September 1900.

T.J. Mahoney, the man who was to become Creighton's first law dean, did not join the NSBA until 1902.

In 1937, by a nearly 80 percent favorable vote the association resolved to ask the Supreme Court to make membership mandatory for anyone who wished to practice in the state. The Court unani-mously agreed to integrate the bar that year.

Today, the association serves more than 8,000 men and women, some on inactive status. Although the lawyers are concentrated in the Cornhusker state, others live and work in almost every state and throughout the world.

Big Jobs Face Leadership

During Bob O'Connor's term in office, he has some particularly important tasks facing him.

One is the Volunteer Lawyers Project. In a letter to the entire membership O'Connor wrote that more than 50 percent of the some poor 20,000 clients seeking services from the clinics and legal assistance projects "were turned away simply because the agencies lacked the resources to meet their needs."

The Bar devised the "One Hour of Sharing" campaign to raise funds and recruit volunteers to help poor Nebraskans obtain legal services. The goal is to have every lawyer provide the equivalent of one billable hour in cash, take one pro bono case per year and donate one hour of time to provide non-traditional legal services.

Both O'Connor and Grant are looking forward to working with each other again. They realize that such issues as mandatory continuing legal education and compulsory malpractice insurance are still facing Nebraska's lawyers. They understand they will have to educate the bar and the public about the revitalized Client Assistance Fund (the NSBA House having voted in October to transfer a half million dollars immediately to help satisfy claims by clients who have been defrauded by lawyers). But both men believe their respective terms will be productive and fun because, as Grant noted, the "lawyers of this state are self-starting, hard-working, fun-loving professionals who are proud to be members of this profession."

O'Connor is married to the former Jean Mergen, a Duchesne Academy grad who attended C.U. They have two grown daughters, both now living in Omaha.

Grant's wife Shari, a UN-L grad with a masters from UN-O, is a special education teacher in the Omaha Public Schools. They have four kids, three in college and the youngest a sixth grader in Omaha's Harrison Elementary School.