

Be You!

Take all your education, training, and talents and use them not just in the courthouse and the boardroom but in the marketplace, the public square, and everywhere you go.

BY RYAN M. BILLINGS

This is my final column as president of the State Bar of Wisconsin. In the past year, I've written about mental health, our shared lawyer community, legal treatises, generative AI, legal education, appreciating non-lawyer assistants, training the next generation of lawyers, the importance of coming together as lawyers "off the clock," and legal advocacy. These are all areas in which we as members of the State Bar support each other and serve the public. But another way we serve the public is by being lawyers.

Lawyers are thoughtful. Lawyers are careful. Lawyers double-check the facts. Lawyers consider the other side of the argument. Lawyers act professionally, even in the most heated of disputes. Lawyers are paid to explain to their clients why an opposing party, factfinder, or counterparty might not see the world the same way the client does. Lawyers are educated, trained, and practiced in meticulously analyzing whether an argument, position, or case can meet the exacting standards required by the law. Lawyers know what constitutes proof and what does not. Lawyers are called upon to discern whether arguments are colorable or frivolous.

We use all these skills to perform our jobs effectively. But these same abilities can play a vital role in public discourse. If freedom of speech creates a marketplace of ideas, lawyers have substantial value to bring to that marketplace. When we use our talents to elevate discussion of vital issues, to champion civility and reasoned debate, and to urge restraint and caution in evaluating developing situations, we make the world better. And in a world dominated by digital communication networks that provide instant gratification and encourage snap judgments, lawyers are needed now more than ever.



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I love the practice of law in Wisconsin and the great Wisconsin-licensed lawyers who practice it. I have practiced law all over the United States, and I can tell you that as a group we are among the very best. So, my final message to our members is to be you. Take all your education, training, and talents and use them not just in the courthouse and the boardroom but in the marketplace, the public square, and everywhere

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you go. We are a privileged few, bestowed by law with the right to represent the people of Wisconsin and to meet their legal needs. And we do that very, very well. In doing so, in performing our great work, we acquire skills that are badly needed in a world that at times seems to be teetering on the edge of insanity.

I encourage members to be that voice of reason, to be the calm in the storm, to insist on proof, to reject fallacy and empty rhetoric, to consider both sides of a position before taking one, to be professional and respectful at all times, and to share with the world the products of your brilliant minds and all the good that comes from applying principles of civil discourse in tackling the world's problems. Be you.

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