



“When I Was a New Lawyer”

Michael W. Drumke
Partner, Swanson, Martin & Bell, LLP
Chicago, Illinois
Chair-Elect, Tort Trial & Insurance Practice Section

What is your background, and what inspired you to become a lawyer?

I was born in Chicago and raised in Evanston, Illinois, the first suburb north of Chicago and a very diverse place to grow up. I studied political science as a undergrad at Tufts University. My father, a plaintiffs lawyer and TIPS member, practiced in Chicago, and I always enjoyed hearing about his cases, the other lawyers and judges, and his clients. He talked about medicine, machines, cars, and cranes, and I was always learning something new. It seemed like the coolest job ever.

Where did you go to law school and what did you do right after that?

I graduated from the University of Wisconsin Law School in Madison, after which I clerked for two terrific circuit court judges in Madison. By virtue of the “diploma privilege,” graduates from the two law schools in Wisconsin can be waived into the Wisconsin bar without sitting for the bar exam. So I was admitted to the Wisconsin bar four weeks after graduation. After I clerked for a year, I moved to Chicago, took the Illinois bar, and started with a defense firm that gave me 80 files to work up from the start of discovery through trial and appeal.

Do you have any young lawyer experiences that particularly stand out in your memory? If so, what have you learned from them and how have they helped you to become so successful?

When I started my first job in Chicago, I was given a very old arbitration matter that had been continued multiple times. The partner responsible for me said, “If this ever goes, you take it.” Two weeks before I was sworn into the Illinois bar, I got a phone call that the arbitration would finally happen, so I started preparing. Two days after I was admitted to the Illinois bar, the same partner asked the associate next door to me where I was. I was told that when he learned I was off trying the assigned arbitration, he reacted with a mix of shock and horror. I somehow managed to win the arbitration, which was binding, despite never having taken a deposition—and never having tried a case. The lesson I learned was that you just have to get up and do it, whether you have the experience or not. It’s the only way to develop confidence as a trial lawyer.

Whom do you most admire?

The list is pretty long: my family, staff, associates, partners, and anyone who tries cases for a living are some of the people I admire most.

What is your greatest source of professional pride?

The outcome of any given case is fleeting, but mentoring young lawyers is something you can look back at with great satisfaction. Seeing young lawyers with whom I used to work and tried to help go on to become successful trial lawyers is tremendously rewarding. A former law clerk from a prior firm is now my partner at Swanson, Martin & Bell. I got to argue alongside another former law clerk of mine in federal court last year, and he was terrific. That is pretty cool.

What got you involved with the ABA?

I’ve been a member since my first year of law school, but I became active when a conflict arose that kept a partner I worked for from attending a TIPS Toxic Torts and Environmental Law Committee meeting. I was sent in his place and sought out the member he recommended who walked me around and made introductions. After that, I was hooked.

What was the worst professional advice you ever received?

I worried that a closing argument I was preparing was running long with too many PowerPoint slides. A partner I consulted told me that as a defense lawyer, you always “go short” in closings, even if the other side goes long. It was one-size-fits-all advice, and it was not the right thing to do for the case. I “went long” and did just fine.

What was the best professional advice you ever received?

“There’s no such thing as a case that’s too complicated for a jury to understand.”

What personality trait has served you best over the years?

It is probably determination. It just makes me want to work harder to get the best results for my clients.

What challenges you the most?

Like many people, I am challenged to find balance from day to day. I want to be there for my family, my colleagues and partners, my clients, and for TIPS. I also need to take a little time for myself and keep myself healthy so I can do all of those things.



Mike Drumke, then and now.



What is the one thing you cannot stand (regarding the law/lawyers)?

The inability of some lawyers to work together professionally to get a case ready for trial, whether it be by failing to honor agreements, refusing to compromise on small issues, or just not being cordial with each other.

What is your favorite type of legal work?

Trials. If I did not have the opportunity and privilege to try cases, I would be doing something else entirely.

What would you most like to accomplish as TIPS Chair?

First, I hope to raise awareness of the current crisis regarding court funding all over the United States. As TIPS members, most of us work in the court system and understand that the judges, juries, clerks, and staff who make up that system need a reasonable level of support to function at a level that guarantees all parties can have their disputes fairly heard and resolved in a timely manner.

Second, we are working hard to bring all TIPS members together at our Section Conference in Philadelphia at the end of April 2015. It will be a great program.

Third, I would like to work on improving the delivery of our CLE programs and publications to ensure that TIPS continues to provide value to our members. That will require investment in and continued improvement of TIPS technology and communications.

What themes will you focus on for 2014–2015?

Fair and full funding for our courts, a successful Section Conference in April 2015, growing TIPS membership, and general committee growth and support.

What can the ABA do to be a good home to young lawyers?

Continue to provide opportunities to write, speak, network, and lead. The ABA is a great place to find all kinds of mentors and experienced lawyers who can help young lawyers. ❖

Mike Drumke’s Advice for New Lawyers:

- Learn the rules and the law during your first five years of practice to become the best “technical” lawyer you can be.
- Seize every opportunity to do something new and gain experience. You never know where it will lead.
- Maintain your credibility with judges, co-counsel, and opposing counsel. It is the most important commodity you possess.
- Get involved in TIPS. There is no better place to gain experience writing, speaking, and learning to network. ❖