

## Remarks of Executive Director Bret Parker

Good evening. I'm Bret Parker, Executive Director of the New York City Bar Association, and it's wonderful to be together with you in person or online.

I'm happy to report that the City Bar had an extraordinary year and arguably is more important to the legal profession and community than ever. I'm not one for bragging, but people want to hear what we think on issues that matter, major periodicals cite our work, policy makers take notice of our reports, and more people than ever continue to want to have a seat at our table.

During Susan Kohlmann's term as President, we have finally arrived at a certain post-pandemic equilibrium in terms of our online and in-person events, programming and committee meetings.

I'm what you might call a people person, so I lean toward in-person connections. While there is a time and place for virtual connection, we work in a profession built on trust and relationships. The City Bar and this building still provide the pre-eminent home for our members to build and foster ties.

And so now, when we do meet here at the City Bar, the once routine feels special. We appreciate what we used to take for granted. Over the past year, so many have had the experience of coming together as members of a community seeing an old friend for the first time in a long time and being able to shake hands or hug. Just one recent example was when New York State Chief Judge Rowan Wilson stood right where I am now and commented how good it was to be back here when he joined us a couple of weeks ago for the McDonald Awards celebrating Family Court attorneys. And earlier this year, SDNY Chief Judge Laura Taylor Swain sat right where you're sitting and was celebrated in the 12<sup>th</sup> Night show in a packed meeting hall. And she sang back to the audience.

And last fall we hosted Justice Sonia Sotomayor for an in-person unveiling of the beautiful portrait of Judge Debbie Batts that hangs right behind you. We've actually had a problem with some events running late at night past the scheduled building closing time because people are enjoying networking or catching up and are lingering. A good problem to have for sure.

So, as many other companies and organizations have given up or shrunk their physical space, I think of this building as more of an asset than ever. Because people still want, and need, to meet in person, and there's no better place for people in the legal profession to meet than here.

Arguably those most in need of meeting in person are junior attorneys, many of whom joined the profession around the time of the pandemic – some even starting their jobs remotely. For them, this space offers a networking and educational lifeline to becoming

full-fledged participants in the profession. We have seen an increase in law students and recent law graduates joining the City Bar. These new lawyers are engaged with our committees and look to the City Bar as a place to help with professional growth and fulfillment, just as our members have done for the past 154 years. Of course, this bodes very well for the future of the Association, and of the profession.

We have also changed with the times, offering more virtual programs and remote committee meetings to accommodate members who cannot attend in person or for those times when it's more effective to gather virtually for maximum attendance and participation. Our flexibility, I believe, will grow our membership and is vital to maintaining connections to members. We have updated our website to allow for easier navigation and searching for members and the public.

A similar calculation governs how we are now approaching our programs and CLEs. Some of our most popular CLEs are one-hour virtual programs that people can do over lunch. And we believe there will be growing demand for top-quality CLE that can be consumed on-the-go like podcasts.

On the other hand, some programs, like our annual Institutes, are as much networking events as anything else, and we believe they can only be truly successful in person. Our White Collar Crime Institute is the prime example: Over time, it's become THE place for practitioners to gain knowledge and CLE credit, and to mingle with the leaders in their practices. And it's become a forum for government officials to make important announcements – that is, to make news. Because reporters have learned over time that it's a place where news can happen and where they might be able to talk off the record with newsmakers, they mark it on their calendar. Last year we had almost two dozen reporters register, including from the New York Times, the Washington Post, and no less than five from the Wall Street Journal. This year's White Collar Crime Institute is this week and you can still register.

Because Institutes seem to be what our members and others want in person, they are becoming a big focus for us: In 2023, we put on 9 Institutes. This year, we're doing 16, and launching ones in exciting and new cutting-edge areas like Artificial Intelligence on June 10 and Cannabis on June 24. The City Bar is a dynamic organization that is changing with the times. This creates fantastic opportunities for law firms and vendors to sponsor these events, support the City Bar and be able to get great exposure and networking opportunities.

In addition to catalyzing changes to the way we utilize the bar association facilities and work, the Pandemic also led to an increased focus on mental health and well-being, and therefore on the work of the City Bar's Lawyer Assistance Program – LAP – which this year is celebrating its 25th anniversary. The transformation in how the legal profession thinks about the issues of substance use and mental health issues over the past quarter century is remarkable. Around the turn of the century, you didn't hear talk in legal circles about

wellness and work/life balance. But that began to change around the time City Bar President Michael Cooper spurred the creation of LAP in 1999, and a social worker named Eileen Travis was hired to run it. Eileen is still running it today, and has never been more busy assisting lawyers and their families who are facing mental health and addiction issues. And affirming the importance of the LAP program, and the work of the LAP Committee, the Honorable Dianne Renwick, Presiding Justice of the First Department's Appellate Division, gave moving keynote remarks at last week's in-person, 25th Anniversary celebration. The legal profession owes Eileen Travis a great thanks for her tireless work in reducing the stigma around mental health and substance use issues, and for the profound effect she has had in transforming the culture in the legal profession for the better.

On other fronts, the City Bar continues to be a leader in pro bono services and international justice policy. Committed to ensuring access to justice, the City Bar Justice Center is back to pre-pandemic levels of pro bono service provided through various programs including its legal clinic at the EDNY courthouse and is expanding services to include a legal clinic for pro se litigants in the SDNY. The Justice Center also will be rebooting our Monday Night Law Program, which has been on hiatus since the pandemic (this program is a personal favorite of mine, especially as a former in-house attorney looking to help individuals directly with manageable commitments).

On the international front, the Cyrus R. Vance Center for International Justice is strengthening the City Bar's longstanding and ongoing connection with the United Nations, providing key research for the UN Environment Program's flagship Global Report on the Environmental Rule of Law. And just last week, the Vance Center was named one of 30 finalists in the World Justice Project's "World Justice Challenge," for its prolific work in supporting the rule of law in Latin America.

If you read our weekly eNews that goes out each Monday – and you should because it presents a good snapshot of what the City Bar is doing and focusing on at any given time – you see a regular section called "City Bar Speaks." That's where we summarize committee reports and statements. When the City Bar speaks, it's through our members, so it's our members that literally give the City Bar its voice. And because when we speak, we are speaking in the public interest, it is critically important that what we say reflects the interests of the whole community. And that's why I'm pleased to report that the number of attorneys from traditionally underrepresented groups chairing our committees has continued to increase substantially, representing one-third of our committees.

Equally important is that our Board of Directors reflect the diverse public profession we are, and the community we seek to serve. Of our 26 Board members, 13 are female, 13 are male, and 60% (15 of the 26) are from historically underrepresented groups.

Our Office for Diversity, Equity, Inclusion and Belonging (ODEIB) is a thought leader in this evolving area. Its "Building Belonging" podcast series is a must-listen, and the ODEIB team

has been contributing some very valuable best practices to help enable City Bar committees and staff to have some very difficult conversations over the past several months.

I'm thinking specifically of the "Hot Speech" program that was in response to the extremely charged rhetoric that emerged with the onset of the Israel/Hamas war. Among the many other things we will remember about Susan's tenure was her leadership, along with the ODEIB team and others, in convening representatives of our relevant committees to talk about how to have civil, inclusive and respectful conversations on this and other volatile topics.

For the convening of that "Hot Speech" gathering, one thing we all agreed on was that this was a category of meeting that could only take place effectively in person. Yet another reason to be thankful for this special space, which in a frenetic world projects a stability that has spanned historical eras and exudes the kind of calm, sanctuary-like atmosphere ideal for even the most difficult conversations.

So in this hybrid New Normal, this remarkable building is ideal for networking, and for tackling the thorniest topics of the day. And if you're one of our many members who is a solo practitioner who gave up your office during the pandemic, one flight up, on the third floor, is our brand-new coworking space where you can reserve online a private office or conference room, with all the amenities, for a half-day, full-day, or longer.

One last program that I would like to highlight today is our Legal Referral Service. If you get a call from a colleague looking for the name of an attorney that practices in an area and you don't have a personal referral, I want you to think about sending them to the City Bar's Legal Referral Service. Labor and employment, tort claims, landlord/tenant, whatever the topic -- we have a panel of vetted attorneys who can take cases. This past year we handled 60,000 requests -- referring 28,000 inquiries, and helping another 32,000 members of the public with other resources. And LRS's content strategy of posting original legal-topic articles on its website and optimizing them for search has greatly increased awareness of the service. Just the other day, Yahoo News linked to LRS's Living Trusts page in an article covering a certain criminal defendant's hush money trial.

I'd now like to turn to some remembrances. This year two past City Bar Presidents passed away, Leo Milonas and Bob Kaufman. These individuals did so much for the legal profession, so much of it for and through the New York City Bar. Among many things, Leo Milonas will be remembered for his leadership as chief administrative judge in NY and commitment to judicial independence. Bob Kaufman will be remembered, in part, for his immense love for the House of the Association (as it's been known over the years) in addition to his commitment to many charitable causes, including immigration and asylum rights. Every time there was a new President, he would lead a tour of the House of the Association (as it's been known over the years), from basement to roof and included crawling under the

HVAC equipment above the library to see the beautiful historical architecture. I remember fondly the tour he gave me when I started.

And my remarks would not be complete if I did not recognize our incredible staff. John Crowley is the new head of facilities and this building, everything behind the scenes and this association – your association – could not run without every single person who works here and is committed to this organization and its members. I appreciate them more than I can express. I'd like to ask all City Bar and City Bar Fund staff in attendance to stand and be recognized.

And there's one staffer I need to mention by name tonight: Maria Cilenti our Senior Policy Counsel. Maria is leaving next month to move onto the next phase of her professional life after 16 years here. She has been a trusted confidante and has helped many committees in innumerable ways – from advising on reports, interactions with Albany and more. Thank you, Maria, for your tremendous contributions and friendship. We will miss you and wish you the best in the next phase of your career.

I also want to thank our outgoing Board members and President, Susan Kohlman, who have served us so well. Two years ago Susan promised that we would do great things -- and we have because she always says yes and always asks what else can she can be doing. I'm not going to say more because you will hear from Susan directly in a moment. Susan, it has been my pleasure to work with you almost daily. I would say Jenner and Block must be happy to have you back, but you don't sleep and I'm not sure they know you've been doing two jobs for the past two years.

Finally, I want to welcome Muhammad Faridi – we're so fortunate to have you as incoming President. Patterson Belknap has always been such a supporter of the City Bar and your history of involvement with this organization goes back literally decades. I know personally from my working with you over the years that you're wonderful to work with. We know you will continue our tradition of exceptional bar leadership.

Thank you.