

A Conversation with Incoming CBA Young Lawyers Division Chair Casey Kannenberg

BY JESSICA A. VOLZ



The CBA is pleased to welcome Casey Kannenberg, an associate at Hall Prangle and Schoonveld LLC, as its incoming chair of the Young Lawyers Division (YLD). With his propensity for action that breaks down the perceptual disconnect between the legal and broader communities, he sees himself as more than a lawyer: He is a dreamer and a doer who is not afraid to “get his hands dirty.” His style of leadership is rooted in the symphonious harmony that results from others playing their parts. As our conversation confirmed, the YLD—and the CBA—have much to look forward to in Casey Kannenberg.

What inspired you to pursue a career as a lawyer?

From an early age, I recognized that my parents worked very hard and were very good at what they do (my father in construction as a small business owner and my mother as an operating room technician). I vividly recall my mother returning home, bone weary, from a long shift at the hospital and also watching my dad manage a construction site like a savant (and at the same time working harder than anyone else). No matter what career path I chose, I was determined to make them proud and to carry on the family work ethic.

My interests as a young person varied from music to mock trial to model United Nations. I attended Northwestern University, where I obtained a degree in political science. I also toured the country as a guitar player in a band during my undergraduate years. Eventually, my interest in studying law prevailed—although to this day I try to balance things out through various musical pursuits.

What prompted your move to Colorado after studying law at the University of Iowa?

Anyone who drives in Colorado is familiar with a popular sign that native Coloradans proudly adhere to their car windows. It simply reads “Native.” There is a variation that rings particularly true for me and my family. This sign reads “Not a Native but got here as fast as I could.” While I was born and raised in Iowa, I got here as soon as I could!

By way of background, my wife Catie and I had our first two children (of five) while I was in law school. After I graduated, we moved to Indianapolis, Indiana, where I started out as a litigation associate at what is now Bingham Greenebaum Doll, LLP. As our family continued to grow, we felt increasingly isolated from our extended families. Our fate was sealed when we visited my brothers-in-law Alex (a student at Colorado State University) and John (a chef at Keystone). We instantly fell in love with Colorado, and perhaps it is fitting that my oldest son, Steven, took his first steps on that fortuitous foray into this great state.

We immediately commenced plotting our move. I took and passed the Colorado bar exam and began the arduous and frustrating job search process (no small task in the 2011 economy). Fortunately, Brett Godfrey (one of the best litigators I have ever seen—and a terrific mentor) of Godfrey Johnson took a chance on me, and in 2013, we loaded the wagons and moved our family across the Midwest to settle in Colorado. My in-laws followed shortly thereafter, and the rest is history.

How did you get involved in the CBA?

When I first moved to Colorado, I had the good fortune to meet the Honorable Lance Timbreza, a past chair of the CBA YLD and the current district court judge in Mesa County, at an ABA conference. Judge Timbreza took me under his wing and brought me into the CBA YLD. At the time, I was intimately involved in the planning and implementing of an outstanding ABA YLD service project called “Bullyproof: Young Lawyers Educating and Empowering to End Bullying.” Bullyproof is an anti-bullying campaign that involves young lawyers going out into middle schools and working with students to create a climate of acceptance, compassion, and non-violence. I have worked with many courageous young lawyers and law students willing to share their personal bullying stories so they can make a difference in the lives of young people.

My dedicated colleagues on the ABA YLD Public Service Team and I had implemented this project throughout the country during the 2013–14 bar year, and Judge Timbreza adopted the program as his service initiative the following year when he was chair of the CBA YLD. Because of my experience and involvement in Bullyproof, Judge Timbreza invited me to join his team and head up the Colorado initiative. Since then, we have implemented Bullyproof at middle schools in Pueblo, Colorado Springs, Denver, Aurora, Centennial, Glenwood Springs, Aspen, and elsewhere in Colorado. While there is much work to be done, I am grateful to Judge Timbreza for introducing me to the CBA and for providing me with an opportunity to serve its members and our communities.



Casey Kannenberg (second from left) on top of La Plata peak in July.

What are some of your aspirations as chair of the CBA YLD?

My goals for this bar year are ambitious, but we have an energized, motivated, and talented Executive Council comprised of young lawyers from across the state who are ready for the challenge. The CBA YLD has a legacy of serving communities throughout Colorado, and we will carry on that tradition by continuing to implement Bullyproof at middle schools around the state and by having a day of service. We will also serve our members by providing high-quality CLE programs, including a Basic Skills CLE day, that are relevant to the professional development of young lawyers.

I am particularly passionate about helping young lawyers with families find a place in our organization and achieve balance between their professional and family lives. To that end, last year we launched “Lawyers with Littles,” which provides educational opportunities, family-friendly networking activities, wellness initiatives, and a free child care exchange called “LWL Connect” (www.cobar.org/For-Members/Young-Lawyers-Division/Lawyers-with-Littles-Connect). Through this initiative, we hope to bring a previously underserved segment of our membership back into the fold and help them find a home in the CBA.

Lastly, we will focus on making sure the entire state has access to our events and pro-

gramming. It is no secret that the CBA has a reputation for being “Denver-centric,” and we will do our part to ensure that we are serving our entire membership. To further this goal, we have adopted what we are calling a “sister city” approach to our program planning. Whenever an event or program is planned in the Denver metro area, our Executive Council will make a reasonable effort to plan a similar event or program in another Colorado city. Whether it’s Bullyproof, the Unbundling Legal Services Road Show, networking happy hours, sporting events, family hikes, other wellness events, or CLE programming via webinar or teleconference, we will bring the CBA to our members across Colorado.

What do you see as some of the greatest challenges facing young lawyers today?

Crushing student debt remains a significant problem for young lawyers, and unfortunately, it appears that the situation may worsen for those working in public service jobs. Public service loan forgiveness has been somewhat of a lifeline for young lawyers working in the public sector since 2007. In exchange for 10 years of service working at qualifying public interest jobs, lawyers could have their outstanding Direct Loans (and even other federal loans) forgiven. Loan forgiveness has been an attractive benefit for young lawyers and others with advanced

degrees who chose to serve the public good in spite of six-figure student loans hanging over their heads.

Public service loan forgiveness is in jeopardy under the current administration’s proposed budget. If this funding is eliminated, future young lawyers who would be willing to work in low-paying public interest jobs in exchange for loan forgiveness would have to reconsider their career choices. The number of people potentially affected would not be insignificant—more than half a million people are due to reap their reward this year. That is a lot of young lawyers

In addition, federal funding for the Legal Services Corporation (LSC) is also due to be slashed under the proposed budget. This would affect not only the approximately two million people who rely on the LSC each year, but also the young lawyers who work for legal service providers and clinics who receive funding from the LSC. While there are certainly other challenges that young lawyers face today—achieving work/life balance, competing with do-it-yourself legal help services (e.g., Rocket Lawyer and LegalZoom), etc.—it is especially hard to ignore those challenges that also detrimentally impact access to justice.

How will you be working with CBA President Dick Gast to continue implementing the bar association’s strategic plan?

One of the best parts of my early tenure as chair has been the opportunity to get to know Dick and to work with him to implement the 20/20 Plan. The CBA could not be in better hands with him at the helm, and I look forward to ensuring that the YLD carries out the vision as set forth in the plan. In one of our first conversations, we were both particularly energized about the “E” in REFOCUS: engaging diverse and statewide populations (with a focus on inclusion at all levels and strengthening local bar associations).

One concrete idea that came out of that conversation was the concept of having a dedicated day—statewide—where experienced bar leaders and attorneys would meet up with young lawyers and newly admitted attorneys at a local coffee spot and discuss the value of membership and ways to be engaged in state and local bar associations. Contact with bar

leaders is often impersonal, conducted via mass email or a newsletter blast. To buck that trend, this fall we will set up shop in Denver, Colorado Springs, Fort Collins, Grand Junction, and hopefully other cities to have coffee with young and newly admitted lawyers to discuss bar involvement and otherwise address their questions and concerns as they embark on their legal careers.

In addition, we are also working on a toolkit for out-state affiliates, as well as adopting the above “sister city” approach to events and programming. The bottom line is that we need to do a better job of “modernizing” bar association involvement and reaching out to membership outside of Denver. Under Executive Director Patrick Flaherty’s leadership, the CBA staff has done a tremendous job of charting the CBA in that direction, utilizing technology, branding, and marketing strategies (the new *Colorado Lawyer* being just one example of many) to engage young lawyers and law students. There is much work to be done, but we are well on our way to fulfilling the 20/20 vision.

What advice would you give to someone who has just passed the bar exam?

First, take time to celebrate this significant accomplishment. Passing the bar exam is the culmination of a lifetime of education, hard work, and sacrifice. Thus, do not simply let out a sigh of relief; take some time to smell the roses. Second, make a commitment today to take care of yourself—mind, body, and spirit. The practice of law is rewarding but inherently stressful, and the deleterious effects on the body are well documented. Personal wellness is something that needs to be part of the daily routine—something that is non-negotiable. Whether it’s running, yoga, cycling, meditation, hiking, or some other way of nurturing your mental and spiritual health, young lawyers should carve out some “me” time every day.

Third, commit to the ethical and collegial practice of law. You will be tested more often than you think, whether it is your billing practices or responding to an email from opposing counsel. The preamble to the Colorado Rules of Professional Conduct speaks to this, noting that “[v]irtually all difficult ethical problems

arise from conflict between a lawyer’s responsibilities to clients, to the legal system and to the lawyer’s own interest in remaining an ethical person while earning a satisfactory living.” Your professional reputation is your most sacred asset as an attorney.

Fourth, find the right job for your personal and professional career aspirations and surround yourself with people who will help you achieve those ends. I am fortunate to work with brilliant attorneys at Hall Prangle & Schoonveld—people who handle complicated and high-stakes legal work with dexterity, and are also great, caring human beings who are invested in the careers, families, and professional development of their colleagues and staff.

Last, but certainly not least, take the time to thank and cherish those near and dear to you who helped you along the way. Your family and close friends shared this journey with you,

and they should know that you appreciate their support, comfort, and guidance. I owe my wife and children a debt of gratitude for their encouragement, sacrifice, and for giving me a reason to pursue justice for my clients every day (with a smile on my face!). 



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