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Strong

by Bradley Bannon

Regardless of who's standing at the podium or sitting behind him, I've never been a fan of the State of the Union Address. Particularly in an information age, when the state of the union is knowable on an hourly basis, the annual address is not so much a legitimate report as it is pure political theater—a genre no one but Lin Manuel-Miranda and the company of “Hamilton” have any business touching.

So why am I using my last President's Column as a State of the Union Address? All theatrics aside, NCAJ is in a transitional period not seen in a generation. As a quarter-century of previous operational leadership came to an end last year, the Board of Governors unanimously passed the mantle to Kim Crouch.

But time didn't stop. And threats to our mission, our clients' rights, and our own practices didn't stop.

I'm pleased to report that NCAJ didn't stop, either. In fact, the transition has propelled us forward, generating momentum at the staff and volunteer levels that I have not seen in a decade of active leadership.

This year, after exhaustive data analysis and review, NCAJ thoroughly modernized its membership structure.

On the front end, we're extending free membership from first-year lawyers to law students, and we're providing one free section membership to lawyers within their first five years of practice.

This will boost our efforts to create the beginning of the membership and leadership pipelines at the law schools (see my previous column in this space), and it will provide newly-practicing lawyers with one of the greatest benefits of near-term *and* long-term NCAJ membership: specialized section membership and listserv access.

We have made sure that our public service members continue to have their service recognized in our base dues structure, while reducing section dues for the rest of our membership.

For members who are able to contribute more than minimal dues, we're introducing a streamlined range of “sustainer” levels and rolling out new benefits and recognitions for them. The same is true with law firms able to participate in the Circle of Advocates and Leaders Forum. While we continue to explore creative ways to grow and strengthen a broader base of support, we have no illusion that the additional support of our sustaining members and law firms allows us to provide services to the membership and the community.

And those services continue to expand.

Over the last year, recognizing clear trends in the consumption of CLE services, we've increased our emphasis on web programming and reached more members throughout the state, with live-streamed and on-demand offerings. We've seen an increasingly positive correlation between revenue and

program quality, allowing us to expand our offering of free webinars to our members on topics that go beyond substantive areas of law and into more day-to-day practice-based subjects.

We've acted on member feedback to make our website a better membership tool, adding buttons and quick links for easier navigation and access to section and division portals. We've added specialized lawyer directories for referrals. Benefits of NCAJ membership are now more easily found and clearly defined on the member's "My NCAJ" home page. We've personalized listserv posts by adding member profile images to make it easier to match faces with the names of your colleagues.

We also continue to expand our Legal Affairs Program, providing more appellate assistance to members with cases that stand to impact not only their own clients, but all those similarly situated. NCAJ's amicus briefs are now posted on the Legal Affairs Program's page on the website, along with the issues, authors, and resolutions of the underlying cases.

With a Republican serving as Legislative Vice President and a Democrat serving as PAC Chair this year, and with Kim Crouch's experience and stellar reputation at the North Carolina General Assembly, NCAJ and its separate PAC have continued to pick and fight our clients' political and legislative battles in a credible, bipartisan, and ultimately effective manner.

Through the work of our committees, sections, and divisions, we're reaching deeper into our legal and non-legal communities than ever before. Recent examples include sponsorship and participation in projects and legal clinics involving debt relief, expunction, naturalization, and bail bond policies across the state. We've also been co-sponsoring social and educational events with affinity bars, seeking to create and strengthen ties with others in the legal profession who share our mission and goals.

Our flagship publication, TRIAL BRIEFS, shifted its per-issue focus from a single practice area to a single subject matter, allowing for articles from different practices areas. This shift not only gives each issue greater membership-wide relevancy, but it reminds us of how connected we are, by the same mission and clients, even if we're in different practice areas.

In fact, the strengthening of that *connectedness* has at once been the greatest product and measure of our success over this transitional year.

Collaboration among staff members, among volunteer members, and between staff and volunteer members is firing on all pistons.

We have predictably but decisively embraced the organization's focus on diversity, inclusion, and equity.

Starting with an afternoon combined session for the Criminal and Civil Masters Programs, this summer's annual Convention program will continue the powerful refrain of fusion: #WeAreNCAJ.

In the meantime, the spring Board meeting, held for as long as I can remember at a golf resort in Southern Pines, will be held this year at the International Civil Rights Center & Museum in Greensboro.

This return to first principles—recognizing everyone's inherent value, fighting for their rights, and understanding that we are all in that fight together—created an energy at NCAJ over the past year that resulted in everything you just read about, and more. It has left our organization on ground as solid—and as fertile for adaptation and growth—as I've ever seen it before.

The state of our union?

Strong. ♦