



Robert J. Grey, Jr., American Bar Association President

[8-09-04 Regan Morris]

Robert J. Grey, Jr. became president of the American Bar Association this week, the second African American attorney to lead the organization. Grey talked to LawCrossing about his rise to the ABA's top office, and what he views as a new era of leadership.

Robert J. Grey, Jr., who took over as president of the American Bar Association on Monday, knew from an early age that he wanted to be a lawyer. He was inspired by his neighbors in Richmond: Doug Wilder, the first black governor of Virginia and Oliver Hill, the legendary desegregation attorney.

"Both of them were within walking distance of my home and so, consequently, I got to know them and followed their careers, which inspired me to want to be a lawyer," Grey told LawCrossing. "Oliver Hill has a son that is my age and I probably spent as much time in his house as mine growing up."

Watching the careers of those two men unfold changed Grey, who admired how they challenged the system "to acknowledge that lawyers of color, or citizens of color, could assume leadership positions in the community that were traditionally for others."

Grey, who also cites the never-losing Perry Mason as a role model, believes his election to the ABA presidency reflects a greater trend of diversity in the legal profession, as well as a trend for minority leadership. Grey

replaced Dennis Archer (who was [one of the very first attorneys profiled by LawCrossing](#)), the first African American president of the association, and half of the new officers and outgoing officers are minorities.

"I think we still have more to achieve in terms of balance in our society and in this profession. But the fact that Dennis Archer... is being followed by me, and there have been two women presidents of the association - well, I think it signals the beginning of a new era where the opportunity for leadership is open to everyone in the American Bar Association," he said.

Grey, who assumed the ABA presidency in Atlanta at the annual meeting, made ABA history in 1998 when he became chair of the association's policy-making House of Delegates - the second highest ranking office in the association.

Grey is determined to reform and improve the jury system during his term as head of the ABA. He believes jurors should be treated with the same respect as lawyers and judges, and that the system needs to be "re-energized."

As partner in the Richmond office of Hunton & Williams, Grey's practice focuses on administrative matters for state and federal agencies, mediation and litigation. He credits much of his success with the three years he spent away from practicing law as chairman of the Virginia Alcohol Beverage Control Board. He got that job when he was just 31.

"It was a great time for me professionally," he said. "I think I really grew up overnight doing that work. I sort of came in to my own and developed a second phase of confidence and maturity."

Grey, who is 54 and says he's been too busy to get married, said it is crucial for young lawyers to have confidence in themselves.

He urges attorneys to join the ABA and other associations to learn new skills and network with their colleagues.

"I think the main thing is for people to persevere, to really stay focused and not to be discouraged," he said.