



[HOME](#) > MODERN LAWYER

Interview

New Trial Atty Org President On Helping The Next Generation

By [Tracey Read](#) | Sep 15, 2022, 1:39 PM EDT · [Listen to article](#)

[Keker Van Nest & Peters LLP](#) general counsel Susan J. Harriman, a fellow with the [American College of Trial Lawyers](#) since 2010, will become its 73rd president Friday at the group's annual ceremony in Rome.



Susan J. Harriman

The ACTL, an invitation-only association of exceptional American and Canadian trial lawyers from diverse backgrounds, was founded in 1950. Its mission is to maintain and improve trial advocacy, the administration of justice and the ethics of the profession through education and public statements on important legal issues.

The college thoroughly investigates each nominee for admission and selects only those who have demonstrated the very highest standards of trial advocacy, ethical conduct, integrity and professionalism.

Although there are more than 5,800 fellows across the U.S. and Canada,

membership can never be more than 1% of the total lawyer population of any state or province, according to the ACTL website.

In an interview Thursday with Law360 Pulse, Harriman discussed what she hopes to accomplish in her new role. This interview has been edited for length and clarity.

What is the admission process like to become an ACTL fellow?

I think it's the highest honor a trial lawyer can receive because you have to be invited, and you're invited after one of the most rigorous processes I've ever heard of for getting into an organization. The lawyers in your area will do an investigation check with opposing counsel, check with judges, and make sure you're one of the top trial lawyers and that you're ethical.

And once that's done, there's a very confidential poll of lawyers in the area who get to say what they want that only one person sees. And that person follows up, talks to people on the poll, talks to more judges and opposing counsel, and makes a presentation to the board and to the past presidents. And then you're either voted up or down.

So given how hard it is to get in, understanding that I'm going to be president of this organization is incredibly exciting. I love the work we do.

What have you enjoyed most about your longtime membership?

I don't want to sound trite, but the highlight is meeting the fellows across the country. It's getting to know people whom you would otherwise never meet and never have an opportunity to get to know.

For me, coming from a city like San Francisco, I like meeting people who don't necessarily share my political views, but I find them wonderful people, and I think it's important that we don't get too locked into our own worlds.

Particularly in San Francisco, which can be such a bubble. And I've had this amazing opportunity to just hang out with people from all over the country and from all over Canada.

What are your goals as president?

What I'm hoping to focus on is improving the standards of trial practice in bringing along the next generation of skilled and ethical trial lawyers. So we do that in a million ways. We co-sponsor the National Moot Court Competition and the National Trial Competition in the U.S., and then there are two similar competitions in Canada that we co-sponsored. We also have boot camps that go on around the country [for] young lawyers.

We recently started working on a new program that I just think is absolutely terrific. It's called the Diversity Trial Advocacy Program for lawyers from racially diverse backgrounds. That program got launched in Chicago this past May with about 50 diverse lawyers from around the United States. And the faculty consisted of more than 10 of our fellows who worked with those lawyers on direct, cross, opening — all the things that you would expect from a great trial lawyer. I want to see that program continue.

Last year, we started working with an organization called Just The Beginning, a pipeline organization founded by federal judges who recognized that people who come from economically disadvantaged backgrounds or who are first-generation lawyers just can't afford to have traditional internships or externships because most of those are unpaid.

Just The Beginning provides students with a stipend that's meaningful enough so they can actually go and do this work. Last year, we reached out to a lot of judicial fellows and asked them to accept law students from Just The Beginning in their chambers. And then we asked our fellows to mentor a Just The Beginning intern who was working in that fellow's city or town. We ended up identifying and pairing fellows with 41 interns this past summer throughout

the United States, and everybody who was part of it has been raving about it. I want to make sure that becomes not just a one-off, but a program we continue to encourage.

We also have a program called "Trial Tested." It's a podcast that we started three years ago, and we had three hosts, and they interview basically superstars in the field of law — our top fellows, but they also interview justices from both the U.S. and Canada. They've interviewed college presidents. These podcasts are entertaining, but they're educational too. They're great stories. As an example, we have a special episode that will launch on Martin Luther King Jr. Day, and it features one of our fellows, Mike Cody, who was with Dr. King in the days before he was assassinated.

What is the biggest challenge facing trial lawyers today?

What happens in politics tends to spread throughout the population. And I think there's been a loss of civility, and I think some of that is because people are much more polite in person. And if you do too much by Zoom or too much by phone, and you're not actually meeting with someone and looking them in the eye, you're not developing a relationship, you don't know the person as well, and it's easier to be less than civil. And I think civility in the profession is all important, regardless of how much the clients might be fighting. So that's a challenge. I think jurors are a little bit like voters.

I think we've moved away from being a facts-based society, and I would love to see us move back to where opinions matter less and facts matter more, both with jurors and with voters. I just know from my own trials that when I represent a plaintiff and I can really play on people's emotions, my trial record is pretty high. And it's much harder when you're just trying to persuade people with facts.

What is the best part of being a trial lawyer?

Being a trial lawyer is still the best job in the world, right? Every time you take on a case, you learn a new industry. You're always learning something new. You have to learn it better than anyone else. You get to stand up and talk ... You wouldn't be a trial lawyer if you didn't like to talk. You get to try to persuade people. You get to really think hard and write. I absolutely love to write and edit and think about how I want to word stuff. It's just the greatest job.

--Editing by Gemma Horowitz.

For a reprint of this article, please contact reprints@law360.com.

0 Comments

Your name will appear next to your comment. If you do not disclose your full name, your comment will be deleted. Your email address will not be visible to the public. **Related Articles**