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Eugene K. Pettis — First African-American President of The Florida Bar by Jan Pudlow

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When Eugene Pettis was a little boy, a speech impediment smacked a “K” sound at the start of every word.

Neighbors would tell the other Pettis kids: “Go get your brother,” because they wanted to hear Eugene talk for comical entertainment.

Lifelong friend and neighbor Lockey Anderson remembers Eugene called her “Kockey”; her dad Joe, “Koe”; and her mother Shirley, “Kirley.”

They laughed, and little Eugene laughed with them.

But his first-grade teacher wasn’t laughing. When school officials said Eugene had to wait until the second grade to receive speech therapy, his first-grade teacher insisted: “No, he’s getting help this year.”

Not only did Eugene get into the speech program as a first-grader, he can still remember the green and beige books his mother would lecture him on every night at the dining room table, pronouncing word after word until that “K” sound vanished.

“The neighbors still remember it as if it were yesterday. And now I make a living talking,” Pettis said laughing. “Who would have thought that?”

Years later, after building a reputation as a successful civil trial lawyer, commanding the attention of jurors with his deep, sonorous voice, Pettis invited that first-grade teacher, along with his kindergarten teacher, high school basketball coach, and a few other special mentors to his home just to say thanks.

“Life had turned out pretty good for me, and I could look back with clarity and see that those six people, along with many others, had a hand in that,” Pettis said. “While I was blessed with a great family, I’ve also been blessed with an even greater community of people.”

Now the 52-year-old, co-founding partner at Haliczer, Pettis & Schwamm in Ft. Lauderdale and Orlando becomes The Florida Bar’s first African-American president. He credits God and his strong mother for

giving him the confidence at an early age to know he could be whatever he chose to be.

From basketball captain at Stranahan High in Ft. Lauderdale, to Black Student Union president and treasurer of the entire student government at the University of Florida, to launching his own law firm, Pettis tempers his achievements with a humble gratefulness that he didn't get there alone.

His focus as Bar president is to offer the promise of inclusion to lawyers willing to meet him halfway by asking to be involved, and to help build leadership skills in those who have, until now, sat on the sidelines.

"I've been who I am for a long time, and that is a person who thinks we owe it to society to be engaged," Pettis said. "We owe it to do whatever we can to make the world better. And I don't think I've ever had an occasion or a platform that is as respected and coveted as the Bar presidency to try to enhance our professional canon of doing public good."

Gene's Time to Step Up

Pettis is quick to say he may be the Bar's first African-American president, but he's not the first one qualified for this milestone.

"I'm humbled, because clearly there were men and women who have come before me who are as capable or more capable to do the task," Pettis said. "But the opportunities were not there, for whatever reason. The centers of power were not open to them."

The significance of his historic presidency was captured when Pettis gave a speech in Atlantic Beach last year. A young African-American mother came up to congratulate Pettis on being president-elect and said she showed an article about Pettis to her seven-year-old son, telling him: "See, you can be anything you want to be."



Chris Mobley, Pettis' white neighbor, golf buddy, fellow Gator fan, and publisher of the *Daily Business Review*, said: "Anybody who thinks Gene will use this platform solely for the advancement of African-Americans in the legal community couldn't be more wrong.

"Gene is beyond ethnicity and race. He certainly is keenly aware of it. He has lived it. But it does not limit his scope of inclusion in his everyday life. Gene is about all the people."

In line to become the Bar's first African-American president was Henry Latimer, a respected Broward County lawyer, former judge, and Bar Board of Governors member tragically killed in a one-car accident on January 24, 2005.

"I was close to Henry Latimer. After his death, I realized we had no minority representative from this circuit," recalled 17th Circuit Judge Ilona Holmes.

"The first and only person who came to mind was Eugene Pettis. I called him up and told him he had to run for Henry's Board of Governors seat. I said, 'Don't make me get the application and fill it out. I'll make up stuff.'"

Pettis laughed, put his name in the running, won that seat in 2005, ran unopposed for the Bar presidency in December 2011, and the rest is history.

"This is the time for Gene to step up and show true leadership," Judge Holmes said. "I had hoped it would have been Henry. I always say God needed Henry in the court of justice in heaven. He's looking down on

us, and I know Henry would be proud of Gene coming in as Bar president.”

Some would ask why it’s important to have an African-American president of the Bar in 2013, Judge Holmes acknowledged.

“I’m a black female,” she answered. “We bring to the conversation a different perspective. We can articulate the struggles and problems and hurdles and concerns that perhaps the others cannot articulate as plainly. Gene brings that. He didn’t grow up rich with a silver spoon in his mouth.”

The Draw of the Home Place

Eugene Pettis was the youngest of seven children of Sara and Cyrus Pettis, who raised their big family in northwest Ft. Lauderdale, where they lived since 1947.

“We lived in Black Town and the others lived on the other side of the tracks in White Town. You’d better be in Black Town at night. And that was not that long ago,” described Eugene Pettis’ 65-year-old sister, Dr. Lydia Patton.

She now recruits students internationally for the Illinois Institute of Technology, and comes back to the family home whenever she visits Ft. Lauderdale.

Even after all the children moved away and their parents passed away, the Pettis family home is filled with so many loving memories, it’s too precious to sell.

“There’s not a place on earth that has as much love and comfort as 824 N.W. 17th Avenue,” said Patton.

“Not many people can sleep in the same bed they slept in when they were two and three years old. On Gene’s bedroom door, the little sticker he got when he went to the fair — a little truck that says ‘Gene’s Room’ — is still on the door. Every plaque, every award, everything we have is still in that house. It’s almost like a museum,” Patton said.

All the children gathered at the family home in February, on the first anniversary of their mother’s death at age 90 in 2012.

“It was a true testament to the love of family that Mom had instilled in us,” Eugene Pettis said. “Even though she’s gone, we still feel that draw back to the home place, and laughing and celebrating her life and our family, even in her absence.”

Father Cyrus Pettis, who died in 2004, was a quiet, solid provider, and worked for more than two decades as a waiter at Polly Davis Cafeteria, before working another 28 years at the post office until he retired at 70.

“He would come home and empty his waiter’s deep pockets on the dining room table,” remembered Eugene Pettis. “We just loved to count his tips. On a good day, he would get \$25 or \$30 in tips.”

Mother Sara Louise Jones Pettis worked as a maid for the rich folks living on the beach before becoming a teacher’s aide. Serving as Parent-Teacher Association president of Dillard High School, the school for black kids during segregation, she was instrumental in raising money in 1959 to build a large gymnasium that holds thousands. Sara volunteered at local schools, churches, and charitable groups.



Congressman Alcee Hastings commemorated Sara Pettis on the House floor on February 29, 2012, shortly after her death. Years earlier in 1985, through the Urban League of



Broward County, Hastings nominated the Pettises for special recognition from then-First Lady Nancy Reagan as a "Great American Family."

Brother Cyrus "Bubba" Pettis, a dentist, remembered feeling like celebrities as more than two dozen members of the Pettis family were zipped around Washington, D.C., in

limousines and took center stage under glittering chandeliers at the White House.

"It was a great honor. I was most proud for my mom and dad. They were the ones who made sacrifices for us to achieve," Cyrus Pettis said. "My dad, who at that time was working for the post office, when we left the White House we went to the postmaster general's office. My dad was just tickled to death to be recognized by the postmaster general."

Describing his parents' 63 years of marriage, Cyrus Pettis said: "She was his strength, and he was her strength. Through difficult times, they didn't let anything break the love they had for each other...."

"We were blessed with a wonderful mother who taught us values that never go out of style, sound values I taught my children and now they are teaching their kids: How to treat people. How to respect our people. How not to be ashamed of who you are. And don't let anyone tell you you can't do things."

Sara Pettis was the family's strong church-going disciplinarian.

Talking back to Mom or calling his sisters names meant a whipping.

"Mom would literally make you go get the switch off the cherry bush. If you got too small a twig, she would go out and get something bigger. You were caught between the dilemma of what size do I get? Do I get the size that's going to bring me great harm or do I get the size that I hope suffices for her?" Eugene Pettis said, grinning at how many spankings he suffered growing up.

"But then, man, when I got older those little cherry bushes did not do anything. I remember she had a palmetto bush, with those sharp edges. She would put them in the hallway on a cabinet as a reminder to me not to get out of line."

Being born into that family, Eugene Pettis said, "is probably my greatest blessing. But I really cursed that in my early years because they wouldn't let us do anything! I wanted to be part of the families down the street because their kids are out at night and they've got all the cool stuff. And we're behind the fence, looking out."

No matter how tired or busy she was, he could count on Mom sitting in the front row of every school event or basketball game to show her support.



Brutal Beating, Serious Tailspin

Parental support rose to a new level in 1972, when sixth-grader Eugene Pettis received the beating of his life at the hands of two white teachers at Sunland Park Elementary School.

Horse-playing with another boy, Eugene ran out of the cafeteria to a little patch



of grass, but the other boy kept running.

"This teacher said, 'Come here! You wait right here!'"

While the other boy escaped, the teacher ordered Eugene to the office, where the burly P.E. coach waited in the clinic.

The teacher pulled out a leather strap, like a barber uses to sharpen a straight razor.

He told Eugene to put his hands on the counter, and the P.E. coach made sure he obeyed as the teacher started swinging the strap.

"They beat me. They beat me. They beat me. And I was just going crazy, losing my breath, and crying," Pettis recalled with a wince.

"They gave me a break, and said, 'Get your composure,' and told me to put my hands back on the counter and started beating me again. I'm just losing it."

Physically sick, Eugene was dazed during the rest of class, and when he got home he stretched across his bed, with bruises and welts stinging all over his back and buttocks.

His sister knew about the beating, because unbeknownst to the teachers, a neighbor girl was behind the curtain in the clinic and witnessed the whole thing.

"They had to take me to the doctor that night, and the doctor said he could not believe someone beat a child like that," Pettis said.

Mr. and Mrs. Pettis went to the school to complain, launching an investigation. The teacher confessed he spanked Eugene three times. Eugene thought it must have been 100.

The witnessing neighbor counted 67 licks.

At the school, they took pictures of Eugene's injuries. They ended up firing the teacher and suspending the P.E. coach.

"While that was going on, I could remember telephone calls from the priest of the man who beat me, saying, 'He has apologized. Please forgive him. His wife has cancer. He's just stressed out.'

"My parents said, 'There's no excuse for that. I don't care what's going on in his life.'"

Pettis called it a "huge irony" that, slightly more than 20 years later, he would be the main lawyer representing the School Board of Broward County in handling personal injury and wrongful death litigation, discipline, and representing the superintendent in termination cases.

That sixth-grade beating, Pettis recounted, "put me in a serious tailspin, because we were in very racially sensitive times. This had just happened to me by two white men, and I was ready to fight the world. I would just come off the bus fighting anybody and everybody. That went on for seventh grade and eighth grade. I had 32 referrals in middle school for horse-playing and fighting, spinning on the bus, jumping from seat to seat.

"Then I got to high school. The first two weeks, I got in two fights. I was just a fighter."

One of the coaches warned: "If you get in one more fight, you'll be suspended from school."

"It was as if the heavens opened up and all the prayers of my mom came through. I changed."

Snapping his fingers, Pettis said: "It was over! I never had another issue. I went to Stranahan High and got every honor you can think of. Life just turned for me on a dime."

Broader Horizon

Stranahan High basketball Coach Jennings Coleman remembered Pettis was "athletic, but not the one you would start."

There were many games when Pettis' mom and sisters were cheering on the team from the bleachers, while Pettis sat on the bench.

Practice is where you really learn about the kids on your team, Coleman said.

"In coaching vernacular, Gene busted his butt. He wanted to prove to me, 'I want to play, I can play, and I'll learn and do whatever is necessary to get out on that court.'

"There came a point where I let him play. He played so hard and played so tough. He proved himself to me."

Eventually, Gene became captain of the team. And he and Coleman, now 73, forged a special friendship in the locker room, on the basketball court, and in the school hallways that continues to this day.

As Coleman described, Stranahan High was one of the first integrated schools in Broward County, but it remained a "closed society" in certain respects. One black cheerleader. One black member of the homecoming court. One black member of the Key Club.

"One here and one there. We called it, 'one to death.'"

So Coleman and two other teachers went to the principal and asked if they could start their own service club for black students, and they were told, "No."

"We had to come up with a novel idea. It would be co-ed and we would accept everybody and anybody. We named it the Horizon Club and created our logo. And Gene became the second president," Coleman recalled.

"Gene was a go-getter. He organized car washes. He was the catalyst of our club maintaining viability. He was a good kid with a good upbringing. He had perseverance and a burning desire to succeed. I wished I could wrap him in a package and take him home."

Horizon Clubs spread to other schools in Broward County.

"I took on the responsibility of trying to lead the charge for a couple of years," Pettis said.

"We wanted to open our doors to everybody, and we did various events that would bring people from all clubs under our umbrella. That's where the name – Horizon – inclusive of everybody, was born. That was the philosophy I believed in, and I was taught through my mentors, such as Coach Coleman. You have those seeds as children at home that there's some good in everybody. This experience at Stranahan just built upon that."

A Cut Above

When 18-year-old Eugene Pettis first walked onto the huge UF campus in the summer of 1978, he wasn't about to sit on the sidelines. He got involved in the Black Student Union, and became president in 1979, at the end of



his freshman year.

"I've always been one to say, 'If not me, who?' I saw the organization and I said, 'I can take it to another level,'" Pettis said.

"Those times were still awkward at UF. The black fraternities and sororities had just come on the yard in 1972.... I saw two separate worlds. I saw the black students. And I saw the rest of the world."



He mustered his confidence to set up an appointment with Art Sandeen, vice president for student affairs.

"I said, 'Dr. Sandeen, I'm the president of the Black Student Union. We don't have any money in our budget. I want to have a "Get Involved" campaign to encourage African-American students to get engaged in their university. I need some help from the university,'" Pettis recalled.

"We started a friendship on that occasion. The worst he could have told me was, 'No, get out of my office.'"

But Sandeen said, "Yes," and during Pettis' year as president, the Black Student Union received \$50,000.

"It was more money than I knew what to do with!" Pettis said. "We had to really work hard. I didn't want any of it to go back. I didn't want them to say, 'See, you didn't need it.'"

Sandeen, now 75, will never forget that young leader Gene Pettis, who often came to his office for chats, at Tigert Hall, the administrative hub.

"By the time I met him, he was already a cut above the ordinary student in terms of his ability to see things others didn't see, whether good or lacking, and his willingness to do something about it. Not just to hold up a protest sign, but to say, 'How can we work with the community of the university administration to make this place better?'"

"It was a period of transition, in the aftermath of Vietnam and Watergate, and civil rights and trying to move ahead with many things," Sandeen recalled. "It was not an easy time for young people to be positive about their country and their university. Gene was concerned that the university was not doing enough to recruit outstanding African-American students to the institution and to have enough full-time African-American faculty and administrators. In his usual constructive and positive way, Gene was able to get the attention of a lot of other students, faculty, and even the president about the obvious need at that time."

Betty Stewart-Fullwood, who retired as the interim director of the Office for Academic Support and Institutional Services at UF, was the advisor of the Black Student Union for 32 years.

She remembered Pettis as "assertive and committed to helping others," including serving as a peer counselor to other minority students.

"He studied hard, worked hard, and played hard. He knew how to mix those three," she said. "For him to be the first African-American president of The Florida Bar, that is just Eugene."

Wanting to make inclusion a goal of his presidency, she said, is expected.

"Eugene lives under the motto that you don't get to where you are on your own. And once you get there, you have to reach back and help someone else."

Calling herself a "pack rat," Stewart-Fullwood flipped through scrapbooks of newspaper clippings from

Pettis' years at UF.

One 1981 news clipping showed a picture of Pettis sitting at a desk, with the headline: "Black student leader believes in 'Getting Involved.'"

"A lot of students got their feet wet with the Black Student Union, but Eugene said, 'I can do this at the next level,' and got involved with the whole UF student government," she said.

"Oh, here's a picture of Eugene hugging Mike Bedke, when they ran for president and treasurer of the Students Unite Now (SUN) party and won."



Equal Parts Cool and Nice

Tampa lawyer Michael Bedke described campaigning with Pettis in 1981 on the SUN party ticket, "starting in the commuter lot at 5:30 a.m. until we got thrown out of the dorms at night."

Bedke remembered some people were "a little bit more radical and asked Gene, 'Why are you running with Bedke? Why are you joining the SUN party?' And Gene would say, 'First of all, Mike and I created the SUN party. And I believe diversity also means diversity of opinion.'"

Some said, "You're selling out!" And Pettis responded: "I'm not selling out. I think I can do more on the inside."

Pettis agreed to run as treasurer on the ticket with Bedke for president, only after they negotiated that Pettis would get to name four senate seats and one on the audit committee. Pettis convinced some black students to run for those senate seats, and is proud that some went on to achieve great things. He named Julia Johnson, who would later chair the Public Service Commission, and Ava Parker, who served as chair of the Florida Board of Governors, which oversees higher education in the state.

"For the first time, we had an African-American treasurer of the student body, black senators, and black members of the audit committee," said Pettis.

"I just think it was one of those watershed moments. We opened the doors wider for inclusions of all students."

Rick Christie, public affairs editor at *The Palm Beach Post*, who was in the same Kappa Alpha Psi fraternity with Pettis at UF, remembered the confident, charismatic student who preached: "If you want to affect change in our society, you need to be involved in our society as a whole."

And Pettis saw UF as a microcosm of society.

As Bedke described: "Gene is extremely altruistic, but extremely practical. Even back in the early '80s, that was obvious. We were dealing with some big issues, such as whether student activity and service fee dollars would be used to fund or subsidize the transit system in Alachua County, and redistricting the off-campus senate seats. We said, 'Let's focus our limited resources on things that are going to have a true impact on the day-to-day lives of students at the university,'" Bedke recounted.

"One of the things I always appreciated about Gene is he's open, receptive, and he will not allow the group to suffer from group think. I didn't want a bunch of 'yes men.' And with Gene, you certainly are not going

to get that.

"Gene was one of those extremely rare individuals that everyone on campus knew and liked. It was a huge campus and students loved him, and faculty and staff administration loved him. The Greeks loved him. The independents loved him. Unbelievable!

"He was like Denzel Washington before there was a Denzel Washington. Equal parts cool and nice."

Building Bridges

At UF's College of Law in 1982, African-American students were about 10 percent of the class of 200. Two were Phyllis Perrin and Eugene Pettis, near each other in alphabetical seating throughout law school.

Perrin – now Phyllis Harris, senior vice president and chief compliance officer of Walmart – laughed about the time she and Pettis stayed up late studying for their first law school exam in civil procedure.

They decided to get their strength with a good breakfast beforehand at Grandma's Biscuits at 13th Street and University Avenue.

At the exam an hour later, Pettis was sitting two desks down, and began sweating profusely, whispering to Perrin: "I'm sick! I'm sick!"

"And I said, 'Don't do it here. I can't help you! You're on your own.'"

Pettis ran out of the classroom and returned about 45 minutes later during the three-hour exam.

"I never saw anyone write that fast, scribbling, fast, fast, fast. He got a C+, and probably would have gotten a B if he'd had those extra 45 minutes," Harris said with a laugh.

"What I always appreciated about Eugene was his sense of focus and ambition in a good way, that 'I'm not going to let anyone characterize what I can become because of the skin I am in,' as an African-American male," Harris said.

"There were many times we did not feel included at the law school. Our circle was just us. But Eugene was great at building bridges. He was big about working within the system and networking and trying to find common ground. Eugene has a great sense of responsibility to lift others up because he was lifted up."

"You're Hired!"

When it came time to land his first job as a new lawyer in 1985, most law firms in Florida were still not hiring many African-Americans.

During interviews, Pettis recalled, "The big discussion would be: 'You'll be our first African-American. How do you feel about that?' I would tell them, 'I'm beyond that. I think you need to ask yourself, how do you feel about that?' I guess that was a little too straight, because I didn't get any of those jobs."

Finally Conrad, Scherer and James in Ft. Lauderdale promised an interview and mailed a \$25 Eastern Airline ticket to fly Pettis back to his hometown.



"I interviewed in the building where I am right now," Pettis said. "I told them point blank: 'Whether you hire me or not, I'm going to be a successful lawyer in this town.'"

One of the firm's partners, Gordon James, said: "I believe you."

The next day, Pettis got the call from law firm founding partner Rex Conrad, who said the magic words: "You're hired."

When Conrad retired in 1991, seven lawyers broke off and started their own firm. In 1996, Pettis and Jim Haliczzer split off from that group to form their own practice.

"Energy, optimism, and enthusiasm" are the words that sprang to mind when Haliczzer described his longtime friend and law partner, the same qualities he saw when he sat in the room when Pettis was first interviewed in 1985.

"Gene brings a genuine desire to do something good for the Bar that is not based on any kind of self-interest or self-aggrandizement," Haliczzer said.

"He is there for the right reasons. He wants to do something good for lawyers in particular and the community at large."

When Pettis talked about what he loves about being a lawyer, it ties in with why he wants to lead Florida's 96,000 lawyers.

"One of the first canons of our creed of professionalism is to do public good. And I don't think there's any profession that has been blessed with the fruits of labor, the financial wherewithal, and the skills of advocacy to truly do good at the level that the lawyer does," Pettis said.

"And if we are to go through our careers and all we're looking at is how much money we can make, I think we will miss one of the greatest parts of the experience, and that's doing good. Because at some point, you can only make so much money and spend so much money, but there's always room for doing good."

"He's Just Dad."



Sheila Pettis still has the business card her husband handed her in 1985, at the courthouse elevator when she asked him if he was a lawyer.

She was a pretrial release counselor who interviewed freshly arrested jail inmates to let the judge know whether they were good candidates for release on their own recognizance.

Eugene Pettis was a confident young lawyer she'd first noticed across the sanctuary at New Mt. Olive Baptist Church, but they had not spoken until now.

"What drew my attention to him is he was kind. He had a warm spirit about himself, very comfortable in his own being. The way he approached me was very mannerly. He was just so polite and persistent," recalled Sheila, who now works as a

substitute teacher in Broward County and volunteers at church and charitable organizations.

Back at her office, only a couple hours later, it was Eugene Pettis calling for a date. After going to the movie, "Out of Africa," Gene said he had to go to the train station to pick up his mother.

And Sheila thought: "You want me to meet your mother just after the first date? It must mean something!"

"Not only did I meet his mother, I met his father that night. And his father said to me, 'You must be a shoo-in.'"

"My mom always told me, 'You know a good man when he treats his mother with the utmost respect. He will treat his wife well, too.'"

While dating, Sheila and Eugene took a cruise to the Bahamas and Cozumel. Unbeknownst to Sheila, Eugene was planning to propose and had already shared his big secret with the group of tourists they dined with every evening at the same assigned table on the ship.

The mariachi band kept circling around their table, serenading.

Finally, Gene dropped to his knee and proposed.

"All I could say was, 'Yes!'"

The dining group beamed with smiles.

Later, Sheila said: "They knew! What if I had said, 'No'?"

"I would have tossed you overboard," Gene said with a laugh.

They married in 1988, and have two daughters Shenele and Shardé, both students at the University of Florida.

Shenele, 23, is an IL governor of the Law Student Division of The Florida Bar's Young Lawyers Division.

"When I got elected, I called Dad and told him, 'This is step one to taking over your job. Everyone will forget about you,'" she said laughing.

"When I found out he's doing the commencement speech for the law school this year, I texted him: 'Hey, Dad: I can hear the boos from here. I can hear the stampede of protesters to the dean's office.'"

Her dad shaped her legal mind at an early age.

"When I was little, like seven or eight, and got in trouble, like talking back or not getting a good grade in school, Dad would write up a contract and I had to sign it and make promises. If I broke the contract, I would get my Walkman CD player taken away."

Still involved at UF, Gene Pettis is something of a celebrity at the law school, though to Shenele he's just "Dad."



"I had to do oral argument for a class and one of the judges knew my dad. Most people talk about his character: warm and humble and dynamic. And I think it's all in the way he speaks. You want to listen to him."

She told how her dad loved to coach her in basketball, when she played with the Ballers team at the rec center.



"He would sit near the bench and coach us. He was super competitive. He was making all these plays, and even got out a white board to draw out plays. We are like 12-year-old girls. We really don't care," Shenele said, laughing.

Eighteen-year-old Shardé, who serves on the UF Freshman Leadership Council and Leadership Development Institute, said, "I'm glad I got involved like Dad told me to. I know that I've gotten a big head start compared to other freshmen."

One favorite memory of her dad was when she was playing goalie in a soccer game in the eighth grade, during the penalty kick in the playoffs.

"My dad is running down the sideline and stood next to the goalies, yelling, 'Get on your toes! Keep your eye on the ball! The ball is coming to you!'

"A lot of times when he was coaching he was contradicting what the actual coach would say and I had to tune him out. But this time I listened to him. I kept my eye on the ball. It was coming right for my stomach. I caught the ball and we won the game. Dad ran on the field. It was an incredible moment!" Shardé said.

Another testament to his fatherly enthusiasm was the elaborate science project on kinetic energy he helped her build in the fifth grade.

"I had a little project in mind, but in the end it had a motorized Ferris wheel with motorized parts and different moving amusement park rides. He's a perfectionist. I had to stay up all night. It surpassed my teacher's expectations. I think that project is still somewhere in our garage," Shardé said.

At UF's Reitz Union, the Hall of Fame pictures wrap around the third floor. Around the corner, hangs Dad's portrait.

"The pictures start out in color and my dad's is in black and white," Shardé said. "Yes, it was that long ago."

Mentor Becomes Mentee

Eugene Pettis' first day at his first job out of law school wasn't supposed to be for another week. But Rex Conrad, the firm's founding partner at Conrad, Scherer and James, called him on a Friday and said, "I'm starting a trial on Monday and I would like you to start with me."

"I literally came in Monday, and I was in trial for three weeks in a brain-damaged baby case with Rex Conrad, observing, figuring — what the hell is going on here? This is all new to me," Pettis recounted of that baptism by fire in 1985.

"He just threw me out there. He believed in me."

Their mentoring relationship forged during that trial continued until Conrad's death in 1999.

"Every day, he would end the day by calling me down to his office and saying, 'Let's talk.'

"Rex would say, 'What happened today? How did the hearing go? How did the depo go? You should have done it this way.'

"He would often say, 'You know what? This is like a residency at Johns Hopkins that I'm giving you.' And we went on to become great personal friends," Pettis said.

"I couldn't imagine my legal career without having those six years with Rex. I mean, he just took it to a different level and gave me the time to nurture my writing skills, speaking skills — and even how to dress."

Fast forward to 2007, when Alan Nash graduated from Florida State University College of Law and was breaking into practicing law and searching for guidance.

"I made a lot of cold calls, hoping people would actually call me back," Nash recounted. "Gene was one of three who actually did. He told me, through email, to contact his secretary and get a time to have lunch together.

"It was a big deal. I was so excited this guy would sit and talk with me. He took me to lunch at Capital Grille."

Pettis has helped Nash with how to better market his legal skills, land a big client, and deal with a personality conflict with a client.

The lunches and mentoring continue to this day.

"I would call him at two in the morning. I feel that comfortable. He has become more like a big brother and has always made time for me. Now, though, when we have lunch, I pick up the check."

Never involved in Florida Bar activities before, Nash has applied for Pettis' brainchild, the Leadership Academy. And he applied to serve on the Student Education and Admission to the Bar Committee, and Pettis appointed him.

"I know I pay my dues. But I never thought of The Florida Bar as a way to help me. But now that Gene is president, and I'm seeing it as my mentor is doing this. This guy is going to be something special as president."

Nash, who works at Marshall, Dennehey, Warner, Coleman, and Goggin in Ft. Lauderdale, finds time to also mentor young law students.

"I got that from Gene, that giving-back mentality," Nash said. "I still remember what it's like to be a guy just out of law school looking for a mentor, how hard it was to find someone like Gene. I want to make sure I give back."

Pettis' Presidential Goals

Eugene Pettis knows he will have succeeded in his year as Florida Bar president "if I can look across the Bar and all of its component parts — sections, committees, grievance committees, standing committees — and see a greater diverse, engaged population.

"If I can see that we have put in place a Leadership Academy that will continue to groom leaders from every sector of our community — racial, gender, ethnic, practice group areas, geographical areas — that we as a Bar are going to come together under one tent, one common curriculum. And if I can see that, I will believe that my year has been served well.

"People want to believe in fairness, equality, inclusion. I think those are our natural core beliefs. If you put kindergarten kids in a classroom, they gravitate toward each other, irrespective of their differences. And I think that's where we want to be naturally. So when you are able to put somebody forward that shows progress toward that goal of inclusion, I think it's good for all of us."

Leadership Academy

Holding its initial session at the Bar's Annual Convention in June, the Wm. Reece Smith, Jr. Leadership Academy, named after the late chair emeritus of Carlton Fields, aims to train future leaders of the Bar and the profession.

"We can talk diversity, but if people aren't given the training, the tools to really succeed, it's just empty talk," Pettis said. "Some people, I think, are just born with the skills that they are comfortable stepping forward. Other people need more enrichment opportunities. But in order to make sure we have a culture within our Bar and profession of true inclusion, I think we need to have a system, a curriculum, that teaches skills: communication skills, advocacy skills, organizational skills, and strategic planning skills.

"In the Leadership Academy process, I'm not looking to create the next president of the Bar. But I am looking to make sure that we create some advocates for our profession. Those advocates can take their position wherever they wish: in their communities, in their firms, in their local bar associations, on their church boards. But I want them to be educated, knowledgeable ambassadors of our profession.

"And if we can keep training up people who know the core issues, that can stand up and be advocates for what is important to our core principles — such as a fair, impartial judiciary, and the role that the rule of law plays in our democracy — to educate people they come into contact with why those principles are essential to our way of life, then we have done what we are supposed to do. And that is leadership."

Meeting six times throughout the year, the academy's first chair is former Young Lawyers Division President Renéé Thompson, and 59 fellows will learn about the Bar's divisions and sections, strategic plan, and history.

Other topics will include collaborating with different workplace personalities; balancing personal, volunteer, and work lives; motivating others and delegating; conducting effective meetings; learning effective leadership styles and public speaking techniques. Networking and mentorship will also be focuses of the academy, and fellows will be matched with mentors based on their specific interests and needs.

Get Involved Campaign

As president-elect of the Bar, Pettis made 500 or so committee appointments, and he wanted to make sure he had a diverse group of lawyers from which to choose. So he borrowed the phrase he used in his college days to motivate students not to sit on the sidelines, and launched the Bar's "Get Involved" campaign.

He asked voluntary bars to help vet and name candidates for inclusion on the Bar's standing committees, plus opportunities to serve on special committees, grievance committees, and the unlicensed practice of

law circuit committees.

After making committee appointments in March, Pettis smiled and said his “big tent of inclusion” message has been heard.

“It’s one thing to talk diversity and inclusion. But in order to make lasting change, we need to do more than talk. We need to advance people. We need to put people in positions. True diversity and inclusion is not just making sure that we have women and other minorities on the committee. True diversity is that they are given an opportunity to lead.”

Noting the Bar has been working on diversifying committee appointments for the past decade, Pettis acknowledged it’s a two-way street.

“You, as a diverse lawyer, must make your way toward seeking committee appointments and not wait for somebody to call you. I think it’s a cultural change. . . . When you have lived 30 years of your career and there were no open doors, and now all of a sudden during the last 10 years the doors have been wide open, it takes a long time to go through the process of true openness and acceptance. It may take the younger generation to take us to where we dream of being. It may not be on my time. We are planting the seeds.”

ROPES Initiative

“Just as a rope has different threads that come together for its greater strength, so too is the Bar,” Pettis explained about a concept to unite lawyers across the state in an initiative he calls “ROPES.”

“While we are an organization with hundreds of component parts, all serving a unique purpose, there is a common core mission that we all should come together and embrace. And that, in my opinion, is the education of the general public of the virtues of a fair, impartial, and independent judiciary, and the importance of the rule of law in our democracy.”

When Pettis chaired the Bar’s Constitutional Judiciary Committee (then called the Judicial Independence Committee), he was instrumental in developing “Benchmarks: Raising the Bar on Civics Education,” a program designed to give attorneys activities that they can use to teach the fundamentals of government and the courts to adult civic and community groups, similar to the Justice Teaching initiative used in schools.

The thrust of Benchmarks is that an informed public is the best defense of a vigorous democracy, the rule of law, and an independent, impartial, and fair judiciary. Benchmarks aims to inform adults through engaging activities about judicial review; the Bill of Rights and reviewing laws to see if they are constitutional; facts and knowledge about U.S. government and the courts; and judicial labeling.

Benchmarks training has already taken place, with several activities that attorneys can use when they speak to community groups. Each activity has an overview to outline how the activity should be presented and supporting materials, such as PowerPoint presentations and handouts.

With ROPES, Pettis said: “I am going to ask all of the voluntary bar associations across the state to incorporate into their annual agenda of activities a commitment to do a Benchmarks initiative this year.

“Let’s have one program we do that we have in common. And this year, let it be Benchmarks. If we can come together on that, I think it will go a long way on what should be continuous education of the principles we talk so readily about on ‘The Votes in Your Court’ campaign,” referring to the Bar’s education efforts when three justices up for merit retention in 2012 were targeted by special interest groups.

“But I don’t think it should be a conversation that takes place only during crisis times.”

Commission 2016: Comprehensive Study of the Future Practice of Law

There is no question that the legal profession is going through evolutionary change.

"We all feel this change in our practices, how we interact with our clients, our courts, and each other," Pettis said.

"Legal futurist" Richard Susskind from Great Britain (author of *The End of Lawyers? Rethinking the Nature of Legal Services* and his latest book *Tomorrow's Lawyers*) believes the true drivers of these changes — in our society in general and the legal profession in particular — are technology and the Internet, and people's attitudes of wanting more for less.

Pettis has appointed Bar leaders to serve on this new commission that will look at four broad areas: technology, legal education, Bar admissions, and legal aid/pro bono services.

Under technology, headed by President-elect Greg Coleman, the commission will explore ways to better use technology in law practices, including e-filing and educating lawyers on cutting-edge ways to make the practice more efficient; and how the Bar can use technology to better connect with members to provide more value for their membership.

In the area of legal education, led by Board of Governors member Ray Abadin, chair, and Nova Southeastern University Law Professor Debra Curtis, vice chair, the commission will look at recommendations from the ABA, which is coming out with a report in August after two years of study.

They will look at suggestions for how law school curriculum needs to be adjusted to better prepare graduates for first-day readiness to practice law. They will be working with law school deans and the Florida Supreme Court, as well as the resources of the ABA, to make sure Florida is ready for this transformation.

They will also look at a "pipeline initiative," Pettis said, "because it is incumbent that we start early — even before middle school — to prepare a new generation for the study of law, so when young folks enter college, they are already focused on the goal of becoming a lawyer. We want to make sure that those entering the legal profession come from diverse populations, so that we will have a Florida Bar truly reflective of society."

With regard to Bar admissions under BOG member Lanse Scriven, chair, the focus will be on the critical issue of reciprocity, where law licenses are honored in other states.

"Florida has resisted reciprocity in the past," Pettis said. "We need to update our view of reciprocity, in light of the fact that the practice of law has moved to a more national and international model.

"Also, we need to look at the issue of licensing nonlawyers or nonlawyer technicians for certain areas of the law. This ties in with what we will hear from the ABA study. Without advocating, we must be part of the dialog, as opposed to sitting on the sidelines and letting others shape our profession."

When it comes to legal aid and pro bono services under Adele Stone, a former BOG member and past president of The Florida Bar Foundation, Pettis said, "We must address the huge need for legal guidance for people who cannot afford to hire a lawyer. These individuals are falling through the cracks because of plummeting funding for legal aid services. Interest on trust accounts funding is drying up, with no prospects of rebounding to old levels any time soon, at a time when Floridians' need for legal services is at an all-time high.

"What are we Florida lawyers going to do to meet the demand?"

"One idea is marrying this crucial need with legal education, and allowing third-year law students to obtain practical experience. Perhaps law students could give a year of legal aid service in exchange for law school loan debt forgiveness.

"We need to think outside the box and look at these issues with fresh eyes, and see where we will take the practice of law into the future."

Biography

Co-founder of Haliczzer, Pettis & Schwamm (with James Haliczzer in 1996, adding Richard Schwamm as partner in 1999) with offices in Ft. Lauderdale and Orlando.

Practice Experience:

Focuses his practice in the areas of medical malpractice, personal injury, commercial litigation, and employment law.

Professional and Civic Activities:

The Florida Bar

- *President (2013-14)*
- *Board of Governors, 17th Circuit (elected 2005)*
- *Executive Committee*
- *Constitutional Judiciary Committee (formerly the Judicial Independence Committee), chair (2007-10)*
- *Hawkins Commission (conducted review of the Bar's lawyer discipline system), co-chair*



South Florida Water Management District Governing Board

- *Vice chair (appointed by Gov. Lawton Chiles 1991-99)*

University of Florida

- *UF Foundation Board of Directors (eight years)*
- *UF Levin College of Law Board of Trustees (current)*

Community

- *Lauderdale Manors Elementary School, corporate partner*
- *New Mount Olive Baptist Church, general counsel*
- *Broward County Legal Aid Services*
- *Pettis Family Endowed Scholarship, annual scholarships to selected students at Broward College*
- *Eugene Pettis and Family Endowment at UF Levin College of Law*

Professional Recognition:

AV-rated by Martindale-Hubbell

Personal Injury/Medical Malpractice, Best Lawyers in America (2010-13)

Lawyer of the Year for Employment Law, Best Lawyers in America (2013)

American College of Trial Lawyers

American Board of Trial Advocates

- *Recognized by ABOTA's Ft. Lauderdale chapter as Trial Lawyer of the Year*

Urban League of Broward County Margaret Roach Humanitarian Award (2012)

Education:

University of Florida Levin College of Law (J.D. 1985)

University of Florida (bachelor's degree in political science 1982)

- *Florida Blue Key Honor Fraternity (1980)*
- *Student Body Hall of Fame (1981-82)*
- *Kappa Alpha Psi Hall of Fame (2010)*

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