

Omaha Bar Association Life Time Achievement Award *Celebrating a Legacy of Excellence*

By Alison Rodden
The Daily Record

The Omaha Bar Association announced that Mike Mullen has been awarded the 2023 Lifetime Achievement Award. The prestigious award was initiated at the 2001 Law Day and is only given to individuals who have made exceptional contributions to the legal profession.

The Lifetime Achievement Award is not an annual award, and the criteria for the award is strict. It includes four main areas of consideration: exemplary service to the profession, support and service to the Omaha Bar Association, innovative contributions to improving justice, and longstanding commitment to mentoring in the law.

Mike Mullen, a longtime trial lawyer, has made a significant impact on the legal profession in Omaha. His father was also a trial lawyer, and Mullen grew up in a family of lawyers. From an early age, Mullen was exposed to the law

and would often discuss his father's cases with his siblings around the dinner table.

Mullen attended Notre Dame for college and then returned to Creighton Law School, where he was able to intern as a clerk with his father's law firm during his studies. This upbringing was a full immersion into everything law, and Mullen is grateful for it.

After completing law school, Mullen became a trial lawyer and practiced for over two decades. He loved going to the courtroom and trying cases and won many jury trials during his career. However, he also saw how litigation affected his clients emotionally and began to wonder if there was a better way to resolve disputes.

In 1991, Mullen was introduced to mediation when an attorney proposed mediating a case he was handling. He recommended it to his client, even though he knew little about it. The experience was eye-opening for Mullen, and he

realized that mediation could be a better way to resolve disputes for his clients.

Mullen started to research mediation and found that it was more popular on the East and West coasts but gradually made its way to the Midwest. He began to incorporate mediation into his practice and became a mediator himself. Initially, mediation was not widely accepted by the legal community in Omaha, but over time, it has become more widely accepted due to its ease, gentleness, affordability, and speed.

Mullen's innovative contributions to improving justice through mediation and his longstanding commitment to mentoring in the law were two of the criteria that the Omaha Bar Association considered in awarding him the Lifetime Achievement Award.

When I asked Mike about mentoring other attorneys, he told me the story of Amy Van Horn. Amy came to Mike six or seven

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Mike Mullen's litigation experience has been recognized in The Best Lawyers in America, which lists him in four separate practice areas: Mediation, Arbitration, Personal Injury Litigation, and Insurance Law. Best Lawyers has named Mullen as a "Lawyer of the Year" in six different years in four different categories.

(Courtesy of Kutak Rock)

Laurie Smith Camp Integrity In Service Award



By Kai Van Ginkel
The Daily Record

The Tenant Assistance Project has been awarded the third ever Laurie Smith Camp Integrity in Service Award. This award – started in 2021 and named after the first female federal judge in Nebraska – is awarded to those who have shown great contributions to the community in terms of advanced diversity and inclusion; improving access to justice; providing pro bono service; mentoring others; advancing innovation in the legal profession; or serving and representing the legal community.

The Tenant Assistance Project (TAP) started April of 2020 in Lincoln, early in the pandemic when many were facing the threat of eviction with no income to protect them. Before TAP, tenants would often be unrepresented in court and would not know how to defend themselves, which would often lead to immediate evictions. During the pandemic, lawyers would go down to the courthouse and volunteer their services, before it became apparent that this was a large enough problem to need more than a handful of people working on it. Contacting the Nebraska State Bar Association's Volunteer Lawyer Project (VLP), they were able to form TAP to help their citizens. In 2021, TAP expanded to Omaha and Douglas County.

For Nebraskans as a whole, most cases of tenants risking eviction come down to failure to pay rent, or any number of reasons such as job loss, unexpected expenses, or even being forced to choose what bills you are able to pay at any given time due to lack of funds. "The majority of people we see are doing their best to get by and something happens to knock them off track, and that builds until the point

they are with us in eviction court," commented Lia Bies, the TAP Managing Attorney.

TAP trains volunteer attorneys in landlord/tenant law, giving them the tools to help individuals in need. TAP has been able to protect 98% of their cases from immediate eviction, all while being a volunteer organization. These volunteers also include law students, who work on preparing the case, notifying tenants, and working with the attorneys to assist the tenants. Since 2020, they have helped more than 1,600 families and gained their clients over \$20 million in federal aid or rental assistance.

"It's an incredible honor. Judge Smith Camp was a giant in the Nebraska legal field, so receiving an award named after her is an honor," said Bies. "We show up and do the work every day, and we are so grateful for our volunteers. The program wouldn't exist without them. We're providing the structure, but our volunteers are doing the work, and that is invaluable."

Bies expressed gratitude towards her fellow lawyers in Nebraska. "It's been really great to see the legal community rally around this cause. Honestly this award is recognition of what our community as a whole has poured into this cause," said Bies. "I'm [also] grateful to the Bar Association for their steadfast support of this project. We're here because of a whole lot of people who believe in what we do."

For lawyers out there that are interested in volunteering for the program, contact Lia Bies at lbies@nevlp.org, where TAP will provide all the training needed to assist in protecting tenants from losing their homes.

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Jackson

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What seems different now is that our nation is in what he termed “the midst of a loneliness and mental health crisis, and in the era of social media and 24-hour news.” Adding that “it seems especially bad right now.”

Jackson continued, “As Barack Obama put it, our media diets are ‘turbocharging some of humanity’s worse impulses.’”

The South Florida native brings a wealth of experience to his address and the city he now calls home. He attended what is now the Antonin Scalia Law School at George Mason University in Arlington, Virginia, and earned a Master of Laws in International Law from George Washington University in Washington, DC.

Before settling down in Nebraska, Jackson served on active duty in the U.S. Air Force for 14 years, deploying to the Middle East six times and spending three years at Joint Special Operations Command. He continues to serve as a lieutenant colonel in the Air Force Reserve and write on matters concerning international law and national security.

When working in the D.C. area and attending law school at night, Jackson began to look for something with a greater purpose than simply having a good career and making money. He reported for officer training right after passing the bar.

“I absolutely loved it from Day One,” he recalled.

Jackson’s Air Force duties first took flight in the courtroom where he prosecuted and defended courts-martial for about six years before specializing in the law of armed conflict. The time away from his family led to a decision to transition from active duty to the reserves about three years ago.

He was won over by the team and culture of Kutak Rock and was fortunate enough to be hired in the summer of 2020, during the height of the pandemic. Jackson also found Omaha much to his liking, describing it as a mid-sized city that is affordable, especially when compared to what he was used to on the East Coast. The pace of life in Omaha is a good fit for the family, he noted.

Jackson works in the firm’s public finance department and focuses on affordable multifamily housing: “Making me perhaps the only attorney in the world that sits in the middle of the national security/international law/public finance Venn diagram!”

That statement, with its wry touch of humor, gives you an idea of how he can approach the topic of his book and his address – which, may or may not share a title. But decency, he says, is the key.

“I truly believe that decency — expressed through humility, kindness, empathy, and adherence to objective truth — is key to solving many of our nation’s problems,” Jackson stated. “During the Law Day lunch we’ll discuss how the Bar is the perfect group to spread this message in our institutions and communities.”

He acknowledges that the legal profession is not immune to the increasingly coarse dialogue.

“But I’m more focused on how our legal profession — our training and experience, and our steadfast connection to the rule of law — can make a positive impact on our national discourse,” Jackson emphasized.

While some pundits have suggested the United States is in a state of cold civil war, Jackson rejected that notion.

“Maybe it’s my military experience, but I especially loathe suggestions that we are ‘enemies’ or ‘at war’ with one another,” he said. “At the same time, it’s impossible to deny that there is at least some truth behind the expression, though I also think the severity is overblown by news cycles and social media algorithms fueled by outrage.”

Jackson added, “It’s funny to me that it can seem like a cold war online, but among my actual neighbors and folks in my community we certainly are much more focused on all we have in common.”

Then there are the culture wars, and Jackson suggested those might not all be solved during this one conversation. The term, “culture wars,” he suggested, was hard to define because for some people they are completely manufactured wedge-drivers while for others those issues are vitally important.

“So, I try not to dismiss any issue as silly or unimportant,” Jackson continues, “I think the key to discussing them . . . starts with a bit of empathy for the other side.”

Jackson first suggested viewing the “other” side’s position as charitably as we see our side and have the humility to understand these are often “incredibly complex” issues.

In Decent Discourse, an Amazon #1 release, he followed a model that starts with individual conversations with the people around us. Those conversations are the sort that lead to relationships that affect our communities in a positive way.

“I don’t think we should wait for someone in Lincoln or Washington, DC, to solve this for us,” he stated.

Asked for directions from this point and a message for his Law Day audience, Jackson offered: “Our national problems are just as complex as we are. In Decent Discourse, I identify five specific problems and solutions to those problems, with tangible steps to fix them. But there are a few overarching themes.

“The first is relationships. I encourage people to dig deeper into real relationships with people who have different views than they do — while recognizing at the same time that our nation is experiencing a crisis of loneliness and many of us don’t have any friends at all!

“It’s easy to dehumanize someone or misunderstand them if you don’t have a foundation of trust first, so that’s key.”

He suggested humility as the second big idea. “The idea that with all of these issues — I might be the one that’s wrong.”

Finally, he suggested that as we face a flood of information, people need to make commitment to avoid “junk food” media diets and confirmation bias.

“Attorneys and other legal professionals have specific training and experience in these areas and a great heritage of logic, civility, candor, and so much more,” Jackson enthused.

Jay Jackson is an associate at Kutak Rock, distinguished author and Lieutenant Colonel in the Air Force Reserve. To purchase ‘Decent Discourse: Saving Your Country by Loving Your (wrong?) Neighbor’ visit: decentdiscourse.com/book.



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Sheelytown

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Martha Street exit. This widened the road for faster traffic, leading to the death of the business district that Sheelytown Market hopes to revive today.

Today, Amelia hopes that through new businesses popping up, the area will be revitalized while honoring its rich history. Vis Major Brewing Company sits directly across Center Street from Sheelytown Market. Amelia was a bartender there when it first opened. She recounts, “All of a sudden, neighbors were being pulled out again and we were with each other again. After the neighborhood being disconnected for so many years, it was really nice.”

At one point, there was talk of a neighborhood development project to narrow the road, change the streetlight, and make it a safer and more walkable neighborhood. Ultimately the



Vis Major Brewing located at 3501 Center St. (Courtesy brewhaha.org)

funds were allocated to another project. With six new businesses open and an event center in the works, Amelia hopes that will change.

Sheelytown is a neighborhood with a rich and complex history. From its origins as a company town to its evolution into a Polish neighborhood and its eventual destruction by the construction of I-480, the area has seen its fair share of triumphs and struggles. Today, Sheelytown Market stands as a testament to the area’s resilience and serves as a bridge between the past and the future.

Mullen

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years ago and expressed her desire to follow in his footsteps and become a mediator as well. Mullen mentored her, but humble as ever, he said she was such a go-getter that he didn’t have to do much.

Van Horn started volunteering to do small claims and court mediations for free and promoting her mediation practice by contacting attorneys in town. With her hard work and Mullen’s guidance, Van Horn quickly became a successful mediator in her own right. She and Mullen still maintain a collaborative relationship where they support each other and use each other as sounding boards for issues that arise in their practice.

Mullen himself was humbled and honored to receive the award. He said, “I could not have reached this point

without the support of others and that family support, in particular, has been crucial to my success.”

Mullen expressed his heartfelt appreciation to the various people who have supported and encouraged him throughout his career. Firstly, he thanked the unknown person who nominated him for the prestigious Lifetime Achievement Award, the executive counsel, and Dave Sommers for approving it. Mullen also extended his gratitude to the Omaha Bar Association and the lawyers who have referred and recommended him for mediation cases from all over the country, as well as the judges who have also entrusted him with cases.

Mullen went on to acknowledge the crucial role played by his secretary, Cheryl Stelzer, who he described as always keeping her cool even in the most challenging situations. “I couldn’t have done it

without her,” he said. He also expressed appreciation for the unwavering support of Kutak Rock, the law firm where he currently practices, for allowing him to transition from litigation to full-time mediation.

Last but not least, Mullen expressed his deep gratitude to his family, particularly his wife Joni, for supporting him throughout his 43-year career.

When Mike is not preparing for or attending a mediation, you can find him spending time with his wife and family, which includes four children, a couple of sons-in-laws, and four grandchildren – not to mention a host of siblings, nieces and nephews.

Mike ended his interview by expressing the hope that his Dad is watching with pride from above seeing the life and career that he has built.

We’re sure that he is, Mike.



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