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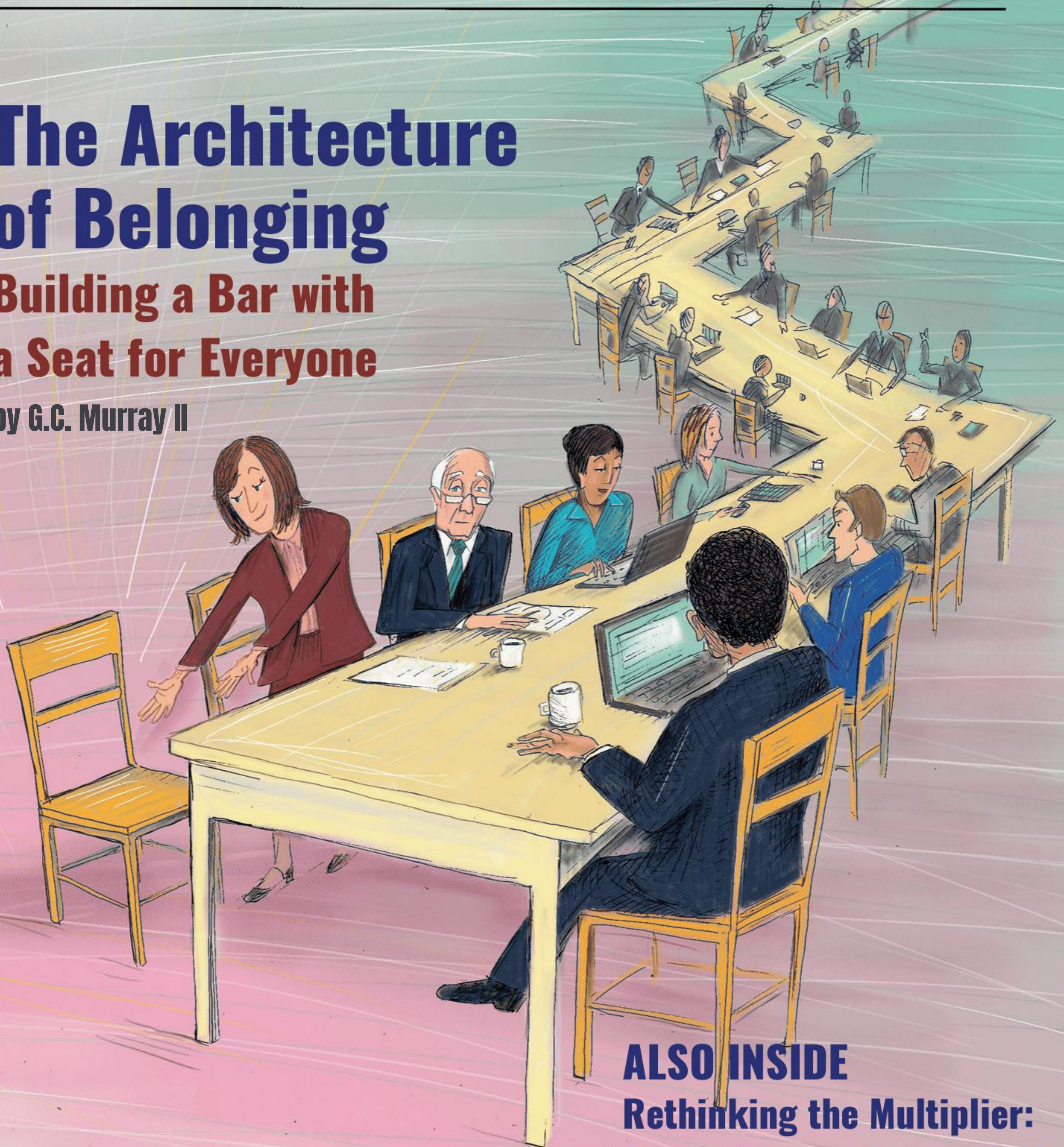
BAR JOURNAL

ADVANCING THE COMPETENCE AND PUBLIC RESPONSIBILITY OF LAWYERS

The Architecture of Belonging

Building a Bar with
a Seat for Everyone

by G.C. Murray II



ALSO INSIDE
Rethinking the Multiplier:
Correcting the Categorical
Ban in FDUTPA Cases

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651 EAST JEFFERSON STREET
TALLAHASSEE, FLORIDA 32399-2300
(850) 561-5600
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PUBLISHER
Joshua E. Doyle

EDITOR
Mark D. Killian

MANAGING EDITOR
Rawan C. Bitar

ASSOCIATE EDITOR
Kevin C. Murphy, Jr.

ADVERTISING
Randy Traynor

CIRCULATION/ADMINISTRATION
Lisa Shuman

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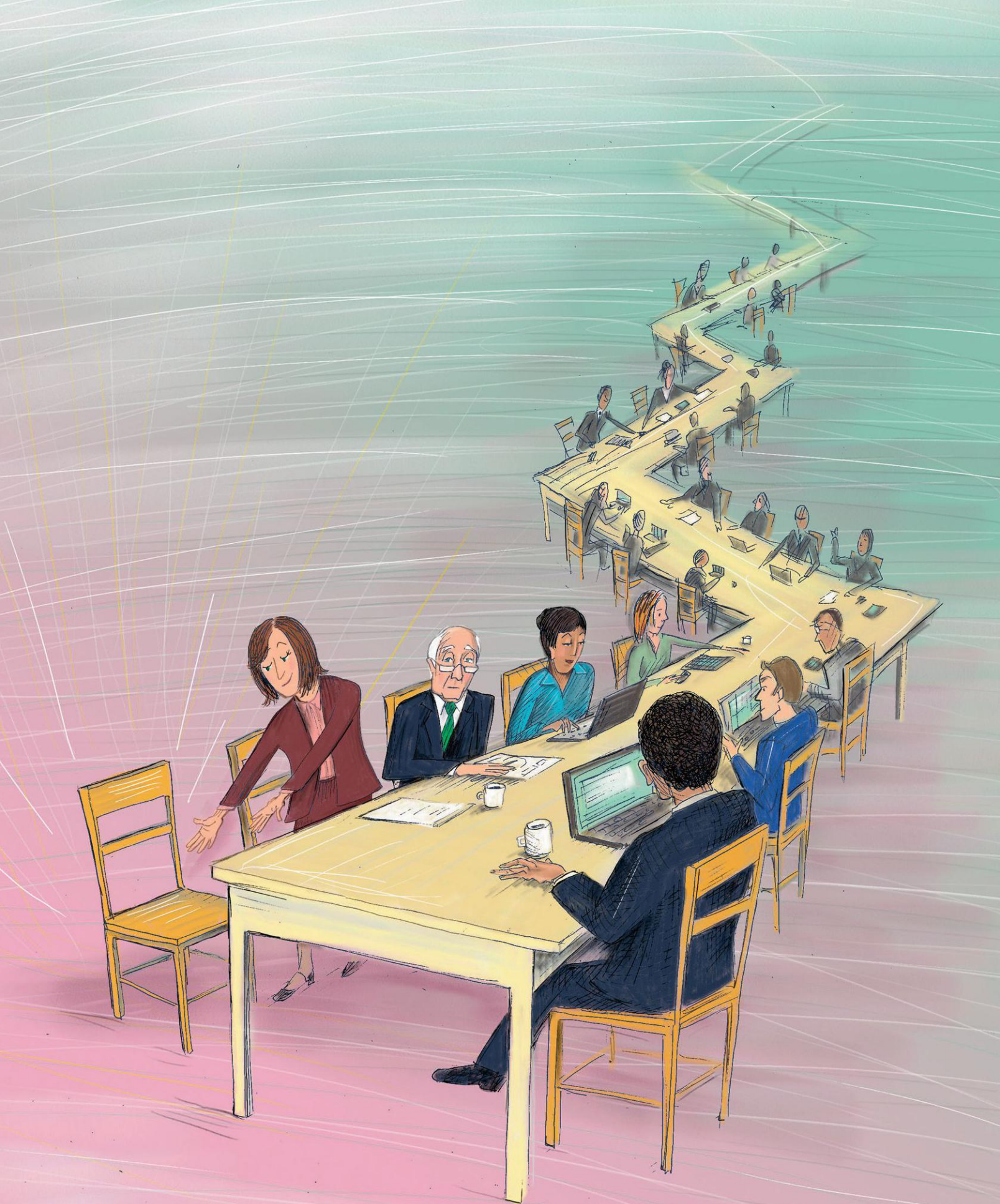


Illustration by Barbara Kelley

The Architecture of Belonging

Building a Bar with a Seat for Everyone

by G.C. Murray II, *Guest Editor*

Belonging is one of those words we think we understand until we try to build it. We recognize it when we experience it, we feel its absence when it is missing, but defining it, much less structuring a system around it, requires intention. It requires leadership and it requires an honest look at what holds institutions together, not simply in theory, but in practice.

Over the past year, as I have walked alongside President Sia Baker-Barnes and witnessed her leadership across this state, I have been struck by how directly her theme, “*A Seat for Everyone*,” confronts one of the most enduring challenges in the legal profession: how to create a place where every lawyer, regardless of background, geography, practice area, experience level, or personal circumstance, sees themselves not at the margins, but at the center of a profession that values their presence.

It is a theme that speaks to the heart of our work as lawyers. It speaks to identity, purpose, and the question every member of a large professional body eventually asks:

Do I belong here? If so, does this organization know what to do with who I am?

Those questions are not soft. They are not sentimental. They are strategic. They shape engagement, retention, innovation, trust, and The Florida Bar’s overall culture. They influence whether lawyers see the Bar as an organization they *participate* in or an organization they *partner* with. In my years working with associations, nonprofits, and leaders across industries, I have learned that the institutions that thrive are the ones that recognize belonging as a *function* — something that can be designed, implemented, measured, and strengthened.

That is why President Baker-Barnes’s theme resonates so deeply. She is inviting us to see belonging not as a feel-

ing, but as an architecture.

And like any architecture, it must be built with intention and detail.

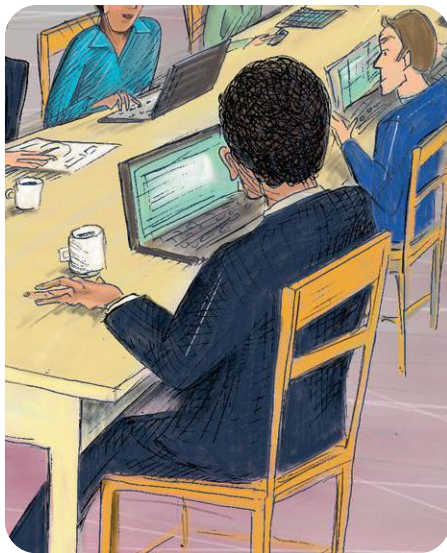
A Profession in Motion

The legal profession is shifting, and it is shifting quickly. This past year, The Florida Bar celebrated its 75th anniversary, a milestone reflecting decades of evolution. A great deal has changed to bring us to this moment, and just as much will need to change for us to thrive in the decades ahead. The 2024 Florida Bar Membership Opinion Survey revealed several telling trends. Younger lawyers report higher levels of stress, a stronger desire for flexibility, and a greater likelihood of leaving the profession than prior generations. Older members are navigating the rapid integration of technology, from AI-supported research tools to virtual court proceedings, while still carrying the institutional memory that the future of the profession depends on.

At the same time, practice settings are changing. Remote and hybrid firms are no longer exceptions. Solo and small firm lawyers remain one of the largest and most entrepreneurial groups within the Bar. In-house counsel, once considered a niche category, now influences significant portions of corporate Florida and the wider business community.

These realities are not obstacles. They are signals. They show us where attention is needed and where the profession must adapt next.

What has struck me most, in reviewing data and in speaking with lawyers across the state as co-chair of the Special Committee on the Sustainability Initiative for Attorneys (SIA committee), is that the desire for belong-



You belong because this is your profession — and because a seat at the table bestows not only a right, but a responsibility. The responsibility to lead, to listen, to build, and to leave the profession better than you found it.

ing shows up in every demographic. Young lawyers want a profession that acknowledges their humanity. Mid-career lawyers wish to have spaces where their expertise is trusted and valued. Senior lawyers want confidence that their contributions will not fade as new voices emerge and underrepresented lawyers want pathways that recognize their talent, not just the barriers they have had to overcome.

If belonging is the destination, then sustainability is the infrastructure that gets us there.

Sustainability as Cultural Infrastructure

When the SIA committee launched, some assumed that sustainability meant wellness programs or work-life balance. Those topics matter, but they represent only a small portion of a much larger picture. Sustainability is genuinely about the long-term viability of the legal profession. It asks whether lawyers have the systems, support, resources, and culture required to build meaningful careers that endure and protect the public.

In my work coaching high-stakes professionals across law firms and nonprofits, I have seen the same truth repeat itself. Sustainability is not an isolated initiative. It is a leadership discipline. Sustainable organizations are consistent in three essential areas. They create clarity so people understand what success

looks like. They develop connections so people know where to find support, mentorship, and community. They cultivate capacity, so people have the tools, knowledge, and bandwidth they need to do their best work without burning out.

These same elements form the foundation of belonging. The difference is one of scale. Sustainability looks at the entire profession. Belonging appears in the daily experiences that shape culture, such as committee service, mentorship, peer relationships, and leadership pipelines. The brilliance of President Baker-Barnes' theme is that it aligns these two forces. It joins the heart of belonging with the structure of sustainability. A profession that invests in both becomes a profession where every lawyer can find a seat and a future.

This becomes even clearer when we consider the lifecycles of the profession. Every career has seasons. In law, those seasons shape our identity just as much as they shape our work. Belonging does not look the same for a first-year lawyer as it does for someone preparing for retirement. Understanding these cycles allows us to design support that meets lawyers where they are, rather than asking them to fit into a single mold.

The "emergent lawyer" is new to the profession and full of both ambition and uncertainty. They are learning how to translate training into practice and how to find mentors

who can guide their development. Their primary needs are clarity and community, and their sense of belonging often depends on whether they can envision a long-term place in the profession.

The "establishing lawyer" is usually five to 12 years in. They have gained confidence and greater responsibility in both their professional and personal lives. Their work is more complex, and their biggest concern becomes sustainability. They want to know how to grow without sacrificing well-being and how to turn early success into long-term stability.

The "expanding lawyer" arrives at mid-career and begins reimagining what their future might look like. They might shift practice areas, open a firm, pursue leadership, or step into governance roles. They are motivated by purpose and impact. For them, belonging is tied to influence and the ability to shape the profession in meaningful ways.

The "steward lawyer" is the experienced practitioner who carries institutional memory. They mentor younger lawyers and steady organizations during difficult moments. Their challenge is visibility. They want to know their knowledge still matters and that the institutions they served will continue to grow. When they are supported, they become an essential bridge between generations.

The "legacy lawyer" is preparing for retirement or gradually reducing



With nearly seven dozen committees and countless sections, The Florida Bar has long understood that excellence happens in small rooms; rooms where subject-matter experts, volunteers, and leaders come together to refine the profession.

their practice. They are reflective and focused on contribution. Their questions revolve around continuity, mentorship, and the mark they will leave on the profession. They remain vital contributors even as they transition into new rhythms of service.

Taken together, these stages form a living ecosystem rather than a hierarchy. Each cycle carries its own wisdom, its own capacity, and its own needs. When we design belonging around the lifecycle instead of the license, we build a Bar where people can enter the profession with hope, grow with support, lead with confidence, and transition with dignity. In that kind of ecosystem, sustainability becomes the natural outcome of a profession that invests in every stage of its journey.

It is also worth noting that we have not even touched on the personal challenges that shape these lifecycles. Every lawyer moves through seasons that influence their professional lives in ways that are not always visible. The establishing lawyer may be trying to start a family or raise young children while also growing a demanding career. The steward lawyer may be carrying the responsibility of ailing parents, mentoring younger colleagues, and managing the pressure of being a stabilizing force in their organization. The legacy lawyer may be confronting questions of health, mobility, or mortality while still wanting to contribute in ways that honor the work they have spent a lifetime building.

These realities matter. They remind us that the profession is not made up of roles but of people, each with complex lives that intersect with their work. When the Bar acknowledges these human dimensions and creates space for them, belonging becomes more than an ideal. It becomes a practice, and it becomes one of the most powerful ways we support lawyers throughout their entire journey. This is precisely what the SIA committee is committed to advancing as it shapes the future of our profession.

Listening as Leadership

Long before this *Journal* issue came together, the Bar president embarked on statewide listening tours, virtually visiting lawyers in their home circuits, inside courthouses, law firms, voluntary bars, and community centers. If you have ever observed a strong leader in motion, you already know that listening is not a passive act. Listening is an assessment tool. Listening is data collection. Listening is leadership.

One of the privileges of advising leaders is witnessing how clarity emerges through patterns in what people share. Across the state, regardless of geography, lawyers talked about isolation, excitement about innovation, concerns about retention, pride in Florida's professionalism standards, and the hunger for meaningful connection.

The listening tours confirmed something many of us sensed: Our profession is fundamentally strong,

but it is being stretched. Where once a single career model defined success, now five or six coexist. Where once mentorship was informal and organic, now it must be structured and intentional. Where once leadership opportunities were limited to the bold or well-connected, now lawyers expect, rightfully, transparent pathways.

The listening tours revealed not fragmentation, but opportunity: If we are willing to redesign the table, there truly can be a seat for everyone.

Committees as the Connective Tissue

With nearly seven dozen committees and countless sections, The Florida Bar has long understood that excellence happens in small rooms; rooms where subject-matter experts, volunteers, and leaders come together to refine the profession.

But, in the context of "A Seat for Everyone," committees and sections become more than administrative units. They become the anchors of belonging.

The Leadership Academy is shaping the next generation of leaders by intentionally emphasizing interpersonal development.

The Professional Ethics Committee interprets and protects the standards that bind us.

The Technology Committee is exploring how digital tools expand access, disrupt outdated workflows, and improve efficiency.

The Voluntary Bar Liaison Committee strengthens local communities in ways few statewide organizations can replicate.

Each committee creates a specific, structured form of belonging:

- Belonging through knowledge.
- Belonging through service.
- Belonging through leadership.
- Belonging through contribution.

If The Florida Bar is an ecosystem, then its committees are the connective tissue linking people, ideas, generations, and visions of what the profession can become. This is also why involvement matters. The profession is at a moment of real transformation, and the voices that shape the next era do not belong to a small group. They belong to the people who choose to

show up. It is not too late for anyone to make an impact. In fact, there has never been a better time. Whether you are new to the Bar or decades into practice, your perspective adds to the strength of the system. Committees thrive when they include unique experiences, different practice settings, and lawyers who see the profession from multiple angles. The work ahead requires new ideas, steady leadership, honest dialogue, and the willingness to build something that will outlast all of us.

Getting involved is not simply about service. It is about taking your seat at the table and helping to shape the culture that future generations will inherit. When lawyers participate in committees and sections, they are not only improving the profession, they are strengthening the relationships and networks that help sustain careers. They are contributing to solutions rather than watching from the sidelines, and they are giving themselves the chance to grow in ways that are difficult to access anywhere else.

Belonging is built by the people who choose to engage, and for anyone who has ever wondered whether there is a place for them in this work, the answer is simple. There is a seat for you, and the profession is waiting for what you will bring next.

Personal Pathways to Belonging

When I think about belonging, I cannot help but think of my own journey. I grew up in spaces where community mattered, where showing up for one another was not optional, but expected. I learned early that leadership was not about titles, but responsibility, and I learned that systems do not transform themselves; people transform systems.

My first entry into Bar service was motivated by curiosity, but my commitment was shaped by purpose. Every committee I joined, every leader I met, every challenge our profession faced reinforced the same lesson: belonging is built in layers.

I've seen lawyers unsure of where they fit grow into leaders whom others depend on. I've watched young attorneys who questioned whether

they belonged in certain spaces become the very people who now hold the door open for others. I've watched Bar presidents, including the one leading us now, take the hopes of our members and turn them into strategies that change the fabric of the institution.

It is impossible to do this work and not be shaped by it.

As I became more deeply involved, I noticed something else. The principles I teach as an executive coach — alignment, clarity, empathy, strategic vision — are the same principles required to build a Bar where people want to stay.

Leadership is leadership, no matter the setting, and belonging is belonging, no matter the scale.

The Future We Are Building

A modern Bar must do more than preserve tradition; it must anticipate change. Technology is not a threat to belonging; it is a tool. But tools require intention. Digital hearings, virtual conferences, AI-assisted research, and hybrid law practices all widen the table, but only if the people sitting at it understand the purpose behind the change.

Innovation should not leave people behind. It should bring more people in.

The challenge of the decade will not be whether technology accelerates our work. It will be whether our culture evolves quickly enough to guide its use.

President Baker-Barnes chose a theme at the perfect moment.

“A Seat for Everyone” is not merely aspirational.

It is directional.

If we take this theme seriously, we will look back on this moment as a turning point; a moment when Florida chose to lead the nation not only in legal skill, but in legal culture.

We will measure success not by the number of programs we launch, but by the lawyers we retain.

Not by the committees we populate, but by the leaders we elevate.

Not by the technology we adopt, but by the people it empowers.

Not by the number of seats at the table but by who feels welcome in

them.

Belonging is the currency of future leadership.

Sustainability is its infrastructure. The Florida Bar has both in abundance...if we choose to invest in them.

A Seat for You

Whether you are a new lawyer or a seasoned practitioner, whether you practice in a courtroom or behind a desk, whether you represent government, business, families, nonprofits, or communities, there is a seat for you here.

A seat built not on uniformity, but on respect.

Not on hierarchy, but on contribution.

Not on tradition alone, but on purpose.

This year, as you engage with the committees featured in this issue, as you participate in programs, leadership academies, listening sessions, and statewide initiatives, I hope you feel the quiet but unmistakable truth at the heart of our work:

You belong here.

Not because the Bar is perfect.

Not because the profession is easy.

Not because the path is always clear.

You belong because this is *your* profession — and because a seat at the table bestows not only a right, but a responsibility. The responsibility to lead, to listen, to build, and to leave the profession better than you found it.

If we commit to that work, then “A Seat for Everyone” will not be a theme for the year.

It will be a cultural foundation for the future. □

AUTHOR



G.C. MURRAY II

is an internationally recognized, award-winning attorney and executive coach who helps lawyers and high-stakes professionals reclaim

time, strengthen leadership capacity, and build sustainable careers. He advises bar organizations and nonprofits nationwide and writes and speaks frequently on leadership development, strategy, and professional growth.



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