

Steve Quattlebaum on His Role as President of American Board of Trial Advocates

by **Arkansas Business Staff**

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Quattlebaum is the national president of the American Board of Trial Advocates, which has 7,300 trial lawyers and judges as members. (Karen E. Segrave)

Steve Quattlebaum is a founding member of Quattlebaum Grooms & Tull PLLC of Little Rock. His primary areas of practice are complex business, toxic tort and products liability litigation. He has been lead trial counsel in more than 100 trials. His corporate clients include manufacturers, investment banking institutions, energy companies, major retailers and medical device companies.

Quattlebaum earned his bachelor's degree from Western State College of Colorado and his law degree from the University of Arkansas School of Law.

What do you hope to accomplish as president of ABOTA?

ABOTA has four missions: preservation of the trial by jury in civil cases, protecting judicial independence, promoting civility, integrity and professionalism in the practice of law and assuring adherence to the rule of law. ABOTA conducts programs throughout the country designed to foster and fulfill each of these missions. Virtually every week members from at least one of our 96 chapters are presenting a civility program, engaging in education of civics in public schools, conducting a Masters in Trial program or holding some event in furtherance of those missions. My goal is to do my best to facilitate and support our members as they engage in those activities and to spread the word about the important work that ABOTA does.

ABOTA has spoken out against personal attacks on judges, some by politicians. How do you assess the current climate around the judiciary?

The judiciary as an institution in our country is strong and resilient. However, when judges are unfairly attacked by those in power or the authority of the judiciary is threatened by certain legislative action, it is imperative that we rise to the defense of the judiciary. The founders of our country recognized that an independent judiciary is essential to the fair administration of justice. I believe the climate around the judiciary today is generally good and appropriate, but when improper attacks occur, I am very proud to note that ABOTA has repeatedly been prompt in defending the judges under attack and condemning the actions of the offenders. We must all be intolerant of improper efforts, by any means, to impose pressure on judges in an attempt to influence the outcome of cases.



Arkansas could see new efforts to reform tort laws. What would your industry's response be?

For ABOTA, it would depend on the type of changes proposed. If the effort sought to diminish the Seventh Amendment guarantee of right to trial by jury in civil cases, we would oppose it. ABOTA is equally divided between plaintiff and defense trial lawyers. We are not a political organization, and we take pains to avoid weighing in on political issues unless they impact one of the missions mentioned above. However, we are vigilant about protecting the constitutional right to civil jury trials.

What's your best advice for managing people and teams?

Sam Walton said that if you give ordinary people clear instructions and appropriate incentives and treat them with dignity and respect, they will accomplish extraordinary things. There is a lot of wisdom in that.

A recurring debate is whether state Supreme Court justices should be elected or appointed? What do you think?

This is a difficult issue and applies to all judges in our state court system, not just those on the Arkansas Supreme Court. When the process is done by appointment, it is imperative that politics be removed from the process to the extent possible to avoid bias in the selection based on factors other than merit. That is very difficult to achieve. In some states, bipartisan committees make recommendations for judicial positions. This seems to work well in some states, but it is not without risks and concerns. Similarly, electing judges has its drawbacks. It requires campaigning for the position, which presents concerns that judges may take into account popular opinion and sentiment when making their decisions, rather than ruling strictly on the facts and the law. There is also the problem of the expense of elections and the influence that certain well-funded organizations and political groups can have on the outcome. ABOTA does not take a position on appointment versus election, but we must all be mindful of the risks associated with any improper efforts to influence the process, whether it is by appointment or election. Most important is that we select judges who are fair-minded, rigorously follow the law and are unfettered by outside influences.

In your more than 100 trials, what have you learned about communicating effectively?

I am constantly studying and learning about effective communication. It is fascinating how we each receive and process information. The flip side of that coin is how to provide information in a way that best facilitates an understanding of the issues involved. Trying cases, especially jury trials, involves communicating complex

information in a way that is understandable and memorable. I grew up in Searcy where I worked in my family's music store and on my parents' little cattle farm. That involved working with and learning from people from all walks of life. Some of those people were amazing storytellers, including my dad. So, this much I know for sure about communication: An interesting story that is true to the facts and paints a building, memorable and moving mental picture is a powerful way to convey information and ideas. And whether the case is about the effect of chemical exposure on the replication of cells, a rear-end auto collision or a broken promise in a business transaction, every trial is a story. Being able to tell it well goes a long way toward effective communication.

What key advice do you give business clients who find themselves the subject of a lawsuit?

This is a fairly easy answer. Do the research to promptly identify and hire an excellent trial lawyer. Of course, I think a great starting point in that search is abota.org. Because ABOTA is an invitation-only organization, our members are among the best of the best trial lawyers in the country. Whether one has been wronged in some way and is in need of a lawyer to bring an action or has been sued and is in need of a lawyer to defend the case, the best advice is to find highly skilled and ethical trial counsel as early in that process as practicable.



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