

## President's Message

Q&A with 2023-24 LBF President  
Deidre Deculus Robert*Interviewed by 2023-24 Secretary Michael J. Mestayer*

**Mestayer:** Tell us about yourself and your family.

**Robert:** I have been practicing law for a little over two decades. Last April, I was appointed by President Biden to serve as the USDA Rural Development Director for Louisiana. Prior to my appointment, I served as the executive counsel for the Louisiana Department of Transportation and Development, general counsel of the Southern University System and in various positions with the Louisiana Department of Justice and Parish Attorney's Office of East Baton Rouge.

Many may think that the move to USDA is a strange or odd fit for me, but it is not. I am a native of Mamou, La., and the youngest of five children. My father was a rice farmer and my mother worked for the USDA Farm Service Agency for 30 years. I am married to James Robert, Jr., and we have two sons, James III, a sophomore at Louisiana State University, and Jude Michael, a senior at Catholic High School in Baton Rouge. We live in Glynn, La. I didn't move far from Mamou and still am a country girl at heart.

**Mestayer:** How did you get involved with the Louisiana Bar Foundation (LBF)?

**Robert:** I was fortunate to be serving as the deputy director in the Consumer Protection Division of the Attorney General's Office, where we were part of the litigation that led to the National Mortgage Settlement in 2012, when the case was settled. As part of the settlement, Louisiana received funding to provide assistance in the form of education and support to citizens of Louisiana impacted by the mortgage crisis. We partnered with the LBF to assist us in administering

those funds. From that partnership, we launched the Louisiana Mortgage Assistance Program (LMAP) and worked with Louisiana Appleseed to provide assistance to those experiencing mortgage and foreclosure. We traveled extensively throughout the state reaching citizens in need of support.

**Mestayer:** Why did you become a Fellow of the LBF?

**Robert:** I fell in love with the mission of the LBF — to provide funding for free civil legal aid — during my time at the AG's office. As a public service attorney, my first position was as an assistant city prosecutor. I saw firsthand that our citizens need legal representation beyond criminal matters. Families need support in several ways, and the funding provided by the LBF to support our legal aid providers and advocates for families and children in need of civil legal aid support is essential. I never knew the LBF existed until 2012! I have been a Fellow since that time. I've served on the board twice and worked on numerous committees. I've seen the impact this organization has on the grantees we fund and the people they serve and am honored to be able to be part of this work.

**Mestayer:** Why do you think the LBF is important to the law profession?

**Robert:** Certainly, they play a critical role managing the funds allocated and entrusted to them by the Louisiana Supreme Court and others, but they carry



Deidre Deculus  
Robert

out the principle of providing representation and advocacy by funding organizations and agencies that provide that support to those in need who do not have the resources themselves to secure that support. This support enables us to attack the gaps in resources and representation across our state which I believe enhances the reach of the profession and attorneys practicing in this area and providing those services.

**Mestayer:** Why do you think the LBF is important to Louisiana?

**Robert:** Because it works! The total net social return on investment for Louisiana's civil legal aid programs during the 2022 fiscal year was 1,799%. In other words, for every \$1 invested in Louisiana's civil legal aid services, these programs deliver \$17.99 in immediate and long-term consequential financial benefits.

The social return on investment for Louisiana's civil legal aid organizations is higher than many other types of social service organizations. This is based on the high delivery and variety of legal services that result in significant future cost savings or additional income to the state of Louisiana and the number of volunteer (pro bono) hours of legal services delivered by attorneys in Louisiana.

**Mestayer:** What do you see as the biggest challenges facing civil legal aid in Louisiana?

**Robert:** We need more attorneys and advocates engaged in this work and I encourage and challenge our practitioners to step into this space as either a volunteer, employee of legal aid or contract attorney to help us close the gaps. Funding

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is always a concern for legal aid and, as the market continues to move and shift, we are mindful to be fiscally responsible with managing funds.

**Mestayer:** What do you hope to accomplish this year as LBF president?

**Robert:** I am fortunate to have worked with some dedicated presidents and watched the LBF grow over the years. In consideration of all we have ac-

complished over the last several years, I am looking to continue the growth of the investments we make in Louisiana and reach of the organization — from increasing scholarship opportunities under our Kids' Chance Program to touring the state with the Justice Bus to provide resources and representation to all our communities. We partner with a trusted network of more than 70 organizations that lead community-driven efforts to help families facing non-criminal, civil legal challenges and we can do more. We

recently engaged a committee of professionals to explore diversity, equity and inclusion in our organization, to include external and internal scopes. I see this as an opportunity for us as an organization to focus on how we operate and who we serve through an equity lens. This will make us more efficient in developing our strategic goals moving forward. I'm also excited to expand our message and mission into our law schools and with other like-minded professionals. It will be a year of growth opportunity.

## LBF to Honor Distinguished Award Recipients at Gala

The Louisiana Bar Foundation (LBF) will celebrate its 37th Annual Fellows Gala on April 21 and will honor the 2022 Distinguished Jurist Richard T. Haik, Sr., the 2022 Distinguished Attorney Leo C. Hamilton, the 2022 Distinguished Professor Andrea Beauchamp Carroll and the 2022 Calogero Justice Award recipient, Judge Ivan L.R. Lemelle.

**Distinguished Jurist Richard T. Haik, Sr.** served as a judge on the U.S. District Court for the Western District of Louisiana in Lafayette from his appointment in 1991 until his retirement in 2016. He served as chief judge from 2002-09. He received a BS degree from the University of Louisiana at Lafayette and his JD degree in 1975 from Loyola University New Orleans College of Law. He was elected as a state court judge in the 16th Judicial District Court in 1984, after practicing law in his hometown of New Iberia. As a trial judge for 30 years, he conducted countless settlement conferences, with the ability to broker amicable settlements in the most complex matters. He now has a mediation practice, through his of counsel position at Morrow, Morrow, Ryan, Bassett & Haik and as a mediator with Perry Dampf Dispute Solutions.

**Distinguished Attorney Leo C. Hamilton,** a partner in the Baton Rouge office of Breazeale, Sachse & Wilson, LLP, practices in the areas of labor and employment law, administrative law, constitutional law and governmental relations. He earned his JD degree in 1977 from Louisiana State University Paul M. Hebert Law Center. He has served as vice president of the Louisiana State Law



Judge (Ret.) Richard T. Haik, Sr.



Leo C. Hamilton



Andrea Beauchamp Carroll



Judge Ivan L.R. Lemelle

Institute, president of the Baton Rouge Bar Association and president and board member of the Louisiana Bar Foundation. He was a member of the House of Delegates of the American Bar Association.

**Distinguished Professor Andrea Beauchamp Carroll** is the associate dean for Student & Academic Affairs and the Donna W. Lee Professor of Family Law at Louisiana State University Paul M. Hebert Law Center. Before joining the LSU Law faculty, she clerked for Judge W. Eugene Davis of the U.S. 5th Circuit Court of Appeals and worked as an associate at the Dallas law firm of Baker Botts, LLP. In 2003, she returned to LSU Law, where she teaches and writes about family law, community property and property. She is active in law reform in Louisiana as a member of the Council of the Louisiana State Law Institute and the Institute's Property, Children's Code and Adult Guardianship Committees. She has led successful legislative reforms in the areas of domestic violence, child relocation, spousal support, surrogacy and community property rights.

**Calogero Justice Award recipient Judge Ivan L.R. Lemelle** was appointed in 1984 to serve as a U.S. magistrate judge

for the Eastern District of Louisiana. In 1998, President Clinton appointed him to U.S. District Judge with unanimous consent of the Senate. He assumed senior judge status in 2015. In his 48 years of judicial service, he expresses appreciation for members of the bench, bar and community who promote diversity, equity, inclusion and access to justice, especially for marginalized and underserved persons. He has been involved in several professional and community organizations, including the Federal Judicial Center's Advisory Committee for the Guide to Judicial Management of Cases in Alternate Dispute Resolution; president of the U.S. 5th Circuit District Judges Association; president of the Loyola College of Law Thomas More Inn of Court; Federal Bar Association New Orleans Chapter Board of Directors; trustee on the American Inns of Court Foundation Board; and member of the American Bar Association Standing Committee on Diversity in the Judiciary and its CoLap Commission.

For the full biographies of all honorees, go online to: [www.raisingthebar.org/distinguished-honorees](http://www.raisingthebar.org/distinguished-honorees).