

Michael J. Mestayer

Louisiana Bar Foundation 2026-2027 President



LBF: *Tell us a little bit about yourself and your family.*

Mestayer: I grew up in New Iberia, LA at a time when it was rather idyllic – a bit like Mayberry from the Andy Griffith days. I am one of seven children and the consummate middle child – two brothers and a sister older; two brothers and a sister younger.

Our home was on the Bayou Teche where my siblings and I had many adventures. I often say that I grew up on the banks of the Bayou Teche, but in truth, most of the time was spent in the Bayou Teche - swimming, rafting, boating, and fishing. My youth was spent outdoors with sports, Boy Scouts, and a lot of childhood “adventures.” My father was an Eagle Scout and so were my four brothers and I. At the time, the six of us made up the largest single family of Eagle Scouts in the country and my mother was awarded an honorary Eagle Scout badge in recognition. I’m not sure who was the most proud that day.

My wife, Suzanne, also grew up in New Iberia and we started dating in high school. This summer I will celebrate my 50th year practicing law and our 53rd year of marriage - which just goes to prove that I did something right. We are happy to have two children and four grandchildren, but unfortunately, they chose to live elsewhere because of greater opportunities – something that organizations like the LBF can help to remedy by making Louisiana a place that businesses and employees relish and appreciate.

Because of the seven children,

we had a rule at home that one of our family’s two cars had to be present in case of an emergency. Accordingly, when Suzanne and I started dating, I was number four on the waiting list to use the car, which meant that I needed to be creative. Suzanne’s family also lived on the Bayou Teche, so on occasion when I had no access to a car, I would take our pirogue and paddle down to her home for a visit. True story.

I started my legal career with a large maritime defense firm and then joined my former law school business partner in a legal practice where we handled many of the major maritime disasters in the New Orleans area. During law school, he and I had run a small school-sanctioned book store in the Tulane Law School lounge where we sold study aids, class note outlines, and some textbooks. It was a great opportunity to get to know our fellow students since everyone was looking for whatever help they could find.

I have been in solo practice since 2006 and have a general personal injury practice throughout the state. I also teach two courses at Tulane Law School concerning solo and small firm practice with a focus on practical skills to allow a small firm to compete with larger firms that have much greater resources and personnel. A secondary reason is to assure that new attorneys are better equipped to practice without taking shortcuts that might find them before the Office of Disciplinary Counsel.

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

Mestayer: Post-Katrina, I was asked to join the LBF as a Fellow, and despite not knowing anything about the organization, it seemed like a worthwhile endeavor. About 15 years ago, I was asked to serve a one-year term on the board and then was elected to a full three-year term. I rotated off the board twice after three-year terms and then was asked if I would be interested in the officer track, which I gladly accepted.

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

Mestayer: As lawyers, we are often called officers of the court, but in truth, we are officers of the people. In our roles as advocates for our clients, we have the opportunity to right wrongs, to better peoples’ lives, and to seek true justice where injustice is seen. I realize that this is an idealistic view of the world and that oftentimes, injustice reigns and that we cannot right every wrong. I also realize that the legal profession cannot fix every problem – nor should it.

However, by our very efforts, we can keep the whole of society moving forward. The LBF is a critical building block in that effort to provide equal justice to all because it does the work that many in the legal profession would refuse as a result of the cost of legal practice. By filling that critical need for the legal profession as a whole, the “practice” itself is improved. Effort is great, but success is better. Even the small successes contribute in immeasurable ways.

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

Mestayer: Just as the LBF lifts the legal profession as a whole, so, too, does it lift the entire state. With some of the highest poverty in the country, some of the lowest education in the country, and some of the least healthy citizens in the country, there are many needs in Louisiana. While the LBF cannot directly affect most of those needs, by addressing the civil legal needs of our population, we have the ability to effect real change.

The LBF not only provides critical legal help but does so in the most impactful way by measure of the Social Return on Investment (SROI). In fact, when compared to the other states, the LBF-funded programs have a greater benefit per capita to our citizens than almost any similar program in the country. We can and should all be proud of that fact. Where there is great need, there is great work that can be done. I guess that is the proverbial double-edged sword.

LBF: *What role does the LBF play in the Louisiana civil legal aid network?*

Mestayer: With its network of over 70 organizations and its position as the largest funder of civil legal aid in the state, the LBF is keenly situated to assess the needs to those organizations and to meet those needs with financial resources. I like to think that we are the pizza maker, continuously trying to decide how the slices should be cut in the most impactful and meaningful way.

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

Mestayer: By far, the biggest challenge is lack of knowledge of the need, followed quickly thereafter by the lack of knowledge of the impact that civil legal aid plays in the lives of the thousands of Louisianans the LBF grantees are able to help each year. This challenge pre-existed the inception of the LBF.

Everyone is familiar with the notion that any person accused of a crime has the right to legal representation, but

few realize that no one has a RIGHT to free civil legal aid. Yet, many times the severity of the situation for civil legal aid far exceeds the severity of a criminal sentence. I certainly would not make light of the deprivation of liberty, but oftentimes once the sentence has been served, the accused has the ability to move on with their life. A battered spouse, a neglected child, a disabled Veteran, or the myriad of other civil calamities with which the LBF grantees deal on a daily basis often concern a lifetime of despair and need.

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

Mestayer: The short answer is clear – civility, pure and simple. Our nation and our state have become so polarized and mean-spirited. We are a country of great opportunity, great empathy, and great equal justice, and yet, that aspect of America is seldom seen, or at least, seldom emphasized by the media or social media. Despite the fact the LBF has grants of about \$15 million annually to help those in need of civil legal aid, and despite the fact that such aid directly impacts over 40,000 cases each year, those good deeds, reflective of the kindness of our fellow citizens, are overshadowed by all of the negative press.

As expansive as the LBF grant program is, we still only impact the lives of a small part of those in need of civil legal aid. Louisiana has about 20,000 lawyers, but many are unaware of the fact that the Louisiana Bar

Foundation is not the Louisiana State Bar Association. Many are also unaware of the good work of the LBF. My goal is to let everyone in Louisiana know who the LBF is and what we do so that, with a little knowledge, perhaps we can channel some of that negative energy into cooperative good.

I ran track in high school and was the first leg in the 4 x 100 and 4 x 200 relays [they were called 440 and 880 relays in those days], so I appreciate the value of a clean handoff of the baton. It takes hours of practice and precision teamwork to make the difference between a winner and everyone else. We are fortunate to have that teamwork in place for the LBF Board leadership and the LBF staff to assure a smooth transition year after year. With that in place, I am very optimistic.

LBF: *What is your favorite memory with the LBF so far?*

Mestayer: This is an easy question to answer. When I attended my first LBF Board meeting where a representative group of grantees spoke about their programs, their needs, and their appreciation of the assistance of the LBF, I was both impressed and saddened – impressed by the hard work and dedication of these individuals who, for little or no compensation, care deeply about total strangers in need; saddened by the vast numbers of individuals who are beyond the reach of the LBF and its grantees.



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