Profiles in Practice

Welcome to the “Profiles in Practice” issue of the Hennepin Lawyer. The following profiles will introduce readers to nine HCBA members. Who are they? They are individuals who have rich, unique backgrounds and career paths. The stories they share are both interesting and enlightening. They show the myriad factors that shape HCBA members as attorneys and the organization as a whole.

Why are we doing this? Being a bar association with approximately 8,000 members, we thought it would be engaging to share a handful of stories of our members, describing how they made the decision to join the legal profession, and the factors that led to their focus areas both within and outside the practice of law.

We believe that it is beneficial to us all to share different perspectives. We grow as lawyers, bar members, and people when we hear stories unlike our own. Enjoy the stories. We hope they inspire you to reflect on your own life experience, and how your background has influenced your practice.

-Nick Hansen, Managing Editor
"I was raised not to see color," Michael Gerould stated, as we chatted over lunch. What began as a formal question-and-answer session turned into a delightful, insightful chat. "I only realized I was seen as 'different' when I got older." This point of view, he says, allows him to see through biases a little more clearly than others.

Currently an attorney at Engelmeier and Umanah (E&U), a full-service employment, litigation, and trust and estates boutique law firm, Gerould dedicates some of his time to training management of small-to-medium-sized businesses about the vast spectrum of workplace-related issues. The rest of the time, he and his colleagues litigate workplace discrimination cases on behalf of aggrieved plaintiffs.

Gerould arrived at the restaurant before I did. He sat with a leather-bound, gold-edged notebook sitting open beside his tableware, with a thick black-and-gold pen nestled between the pages. His cell phone was nowhere to be seen. Gerould had a cautious and thoughtful demeanor; his head tilted back slightly and his eyes searching as he spoke and listened. He was also delightfully warm, funny, and gregarious. In the context of this relaxed luncheon atmosphere, we had a deep, thoughtful conversation about his career progression and thoughts on the challenges of diversity in the legal profession and beyond.

We talked initially about Gerould's current work with E&U, where there is a focus on education, first and foremost. He and his colleagues see themselves first as advisors and educators on issues such as diversity and equality in the workplace, and then as litigators. However, that does not take away from their incredible litigation record. Last year, Minnesota Lawyer recognized Gerould and three of his colleagues as "Attorneys of the Year" for litigating Ewald v. Royal Norwegian Embassy, a federal case in which the country of Norway was found to have discriminated against a female employee by paying her
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$30,000 less than a male employee, though their jobs were comparable.

Gerould’s focus on education and cultivation of companies’ appreciation for diversity is rooted in his life experience. He was born in Detroit, Michigan, to a black father and a white mother. He and his three siblings were raised by their mother in the suburbs of Detroit, where he spent the majority of his childhood. Gerould later earned both his bachelor and law degrees from Michigan State University, graduating cum laude. He was then recruited to Minnesota via the Minnesota Minority Recruitment program in 2007.

We talked about diversity in the legal profession, each contemplating our own diversity and how we contribute to Minnesota’s legal community through it. I shared with Gerould my experiences—both positive and negative—as a female Muslim attorney who wears a headscarf, and he sought to allay my concern regarding whether my identity would hinder my efficacy as an advocate or my development as a professional. I asked him, “As many diversity efforts as there are, though, is the Minnesota bar really more diverse? Is it more diverse now than it was in 2007?” He paused, his head tilted.

“There’s no question that the desire for diversity is there. The case is made by the fact that I’m sitting here. However, there’s a real difference between recruiting and nurturing, which translates into the difference between recruitment and retention. People think the work is done once you’re sitting in the chair, but the bulk of the work for diversity happens after the person is hired.” Gerould believes that there is a business case to be made for diversity, across professions: diverse experiences bring diverse points of view, and diverse points of view increase the reach and impact of businesses from law firms to agricultural producers to companies manufacturing consumer goods. However, he finds that most companies, including law firms, have little know-how on successfully integrating and retaining their diverse employees.

“One of the reasons Gerould loves working for E&U so much is because it is an inclusive workplace. Many of the attorneys and other legal professionals at E&U, including Gerould, worked together previously at a large law firm, Rider Bennett, where Gerould was originally recruited. Eventually Gerould’s mentor, Sheila Engelmeier, asked him to join her after she connected with Ivory Umahen to start this boutique firm.

“Sheila values the perspectives brought by different kinds of people. We constantly collaborate and bounce ideas off of one another.” Despite—or perhaps because of—the fact that the attorneys at Engelmeier come from a multitude of diverse backgrounds, they have created a space where Gerould feels at home.

“The culture of our firm is like a family. We are there for each other like a family; we disagree like a family; and we come together like a family,” he noted. Because Engelmeier is a small firm with an inclusive dynamic, Gerould finds that he is able to have a strong voice, a broad range of responsibilities, and faster growth as an attorney. He could not have created a better situation for himself if he had tried.

Gerould is a person with clear and focused priorities. He is committed to his family, his work, and his ideals: “The issue of diversity and knowing how to foster inclusivity is becoming more and more important. We see it everywhere, and its consequences are everywhere. I mean, it’s quite literally a matter of life and death.” He pointed out that with movements such as LGBTQIA (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Intersex, Asexual) equality, equal pay for equal work, and Black Lives Matter, there are numerous contentious and poignant issues looming before those who strive to create a more just world.

The gravity of Gerould’s profession does not dampen his verve for his work or his hobbies. When he is not conquering barriers to workplace inclusivity, Gerould is experimenting with different foods and cooking techniques, traveling, or spending time with his family. He has traveled across the globe, from Reykjavik to Shanghai, but prefers to take relaxing vacations in Costa Rica or camping in Minnesota’s Boundary Waters.

I asked what he would have been if he were not an attorney. He immediately responded that he would have been a chef, like his brother, who runs a restaurant in Portland, Oregon. While I’m sure Gerould is a great cook, I—for one—am grateful that he became the attorney he is today, or as he would put it: that he “kind of fell into the role for which [he] was most qualified.”