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MECKLENBURG COUNTY BAR

Next president likes low profile

Incoming leader says he wants to stay backstage in political arena

By MIKE DRUMMOND

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Tony Lathrop is a well-connected lawyer who's secured a corner office on the 50th floor of Charlotte's tallest building. One could forgive him if he put on airs.

But in a city and in a profession at times prone to pretentiousness, Tony ("don't call me Anthony") Lathrop offers a refreshing departure from the stuffed-shirt expectation.

Lathrop takes command of the Mecklenburg County Bar next

month. The incoming president says he wants the 3,600-plus organization to bolster member diversity and find ways to help newly minted lawyers avoid job burnout, a chronic problem in the industry.



Lathrop

Court Judge Shirley Fulton said Lathrop is ideally suited to champion diversity in a profession dominated by white men.

"His gender and color can have its advantage," says Fulton, who is black. "Having the message come from him can be more powerful. Folks like me can be overruled."

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Next bar president likes low profile

Lathrop from ID

Lathrop says the bar also can offer more support seminars and networking opportunities for younger lawyers.

A seasoned lawyer and partner at the Charlotte office of Moore & Van Allen, Lathrop would seem at risk of burnout himself. He's often up by 5:30 a.m., checking his BlackBerry. Long hours come with the territory. He's married and a father of three. He's also a godfather to the oldest daughter of U.S. Magistrate Judge David Keesler.

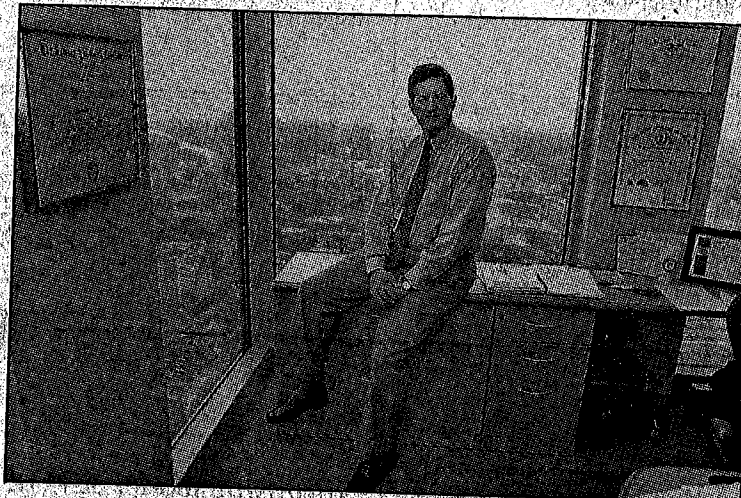
But Lathrop sounds up to adding bar president to his list of duties.

"I just really found I enjoy serving the profession, and through that, serving the community," he says.

The 45-year-old N.C. native has a long history of service — a board position with his law alumni association, a member of the UNC Chapel Hill Board of Visitors, a former trustee of the state's Clean Water Management Trust Fund, and former board president of nonprofit charity Second String Santas.

Before attending law school at UNC, he was an aide to N.C. Gov. Jim Hunt during the 1984 run for U.S. Senate against Jesse Helms. It was the most expensive race in state history at the time and became known as the clash of titans. Helms eked a narrow victory.

"He really enjoyed that," says



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Tony Lathrop, law partner at Moore & Van Allen, steps in as the new president of the Mecklenburg County Bar in July. He has vowed to bang the pots for diversity, community involvement and continuing education for lawyers.

longtime friend and former law colleague Lee Poole. "I think just seeing Hunt in his public persona rubbed off on Tony. Hunt chooses his words very carefully. Tony does that, too."

Lathrop also worked as a local fundraiser for Erskine Bowles in his failed 2002 Senate run against Elizabeth Dole.

Bowles says he is a "great admirer" of Lathrop and credits him for "knowing how to get things done right and on time."

Adam Bernstein, a principal at Carolina Public Relations, says Lathrop is easy to underestimate. He recalls meeting him a few years ago when the two were selected for the William C. Friday Fellowship for Human Relations, a prestigious leadership program.

"When you first see Tony you can make the assumption he's another grey suit Charlotte lawyer moving up the food chain," Bernstein says. "But when you have conversations with the guy, there is some depth there."

He adds that when he's introduced Lathrop, many wonder "when's he going to run for office?"

Lathrop says he's content playing a behind-the-scenes role in politics. The sun beams through the wall of windows of Lathrop's office high above Charlotte. His right eye squints, the result of glaucoma as an infant. Classmates used to call him Popeye.

His office is punctuated with photos of his children and wife, Sarah. But no clues that he's a

bird hunter. Few traces that the UNC alum bleeds Tar Heel blue. No hints of his political ties or that he once was awarded the Order of the Long Leaf Pine, the state's highest civilian honor.

The distinction is given to those who contribute to their communities, show extra effort in their careers, or serve many years in their organizations.

He's reluctant to talk about himself. When pressed he admits he hopes people regard him as conscientious, hard-working and thoughtful.

"I just want to be known as a go-to guy," he says.