Recently Tim Kolly, DRI’s Director of Public Policy, sat down for a conversation with John Parker Sweeney, Brett A. Ross, and Susan E. Gunter about DRI’s extraordinary “DRI for Life” initiative. Sweeney is a past president of DRI (2014–2015); Ross is chair and Gunter vice chair of the DRI for Life Committee.

The Vision

Kolly: Every professional organization establishes for itself a set of defining traits and core values that drive its mission. And, while not immutable, they cannot be changed without altering the character of the organization. If you had to explain the essence of DRI, John, what would you tell people?

Sweeney: DRI is increasingly becoming the primary enduring professional relationship of the defense lawyer by broadly catering to all of his or her critical needs over the course of the lawyer’s career. DRI is an abiding resource throughout a defense lawyer’s career to provide necessary support in good times and in bad; to provide a helping hand to every member defense lawyer, as well as an opportunity for them to give back to DRI and the community at large.

Kolly: So, it’s beyond the professional and collegial. It’s personal.

Sweeney: It’s personal. Three years ago, in 2013, DRI launched its DRI for Life initiative to ensure that “I am a DRI Lawyer” would evoke a sense of belonging to an organization of like-minded individuals who care about you and your wellbeing and provide numerous programs to support, nurture, and develop the defense lawyer, where defense law firms and corporate employers, large and small, often do not.

Kolly: And how do you determine what those needs are?

Sweeney: In 2014, our most comprehensive survey of our members’ needs and wants both confirmed the desire for a broader of offering of programs to support the lives of DRI members, but also gave us very specific guidance on the members’ priorities. Today, the concept of DRI for Life is evolving rapidly, just as the legal environment for its members is evolving rapidly. To flourish in these challenging times, DRI is innovating, building new lines of value for its members upon the solid foundation of DRI’s successful traditional programming. DRI for Life now provides a variety of offerings to enrich the lives of all DRI members. The DRI for Life Committee, under chair Brett Ross and vice chair Susan Gunter, has been working diligently on making these programs a reality for our members.

Current Initiatives of the DRI for Life Committee

DRI for Life Online Resource Centers

Kolly: Okay, Brett, that’s the vision. How does your committee determine what sort of actions will help you realize that vision?

Ross: DRI for Life has developed two pages for its upcoming webpage at www.dri.org, specifically to respond to members’ request for more resources and information on work–life balance and wellness issues. We felt they could benefit from a curated and current list of online articles. Our DRI Work Life Balance Resource Center gives members access to expert, authoritative, and vetted articles online on topics for lawyers, such as how to balance work and home life as a professional, how lawyers can effectively manage their time, how lawyers can develop healthy work habits.

The WLBRC is basically an online bibliography with links to articles of interest to DRI members dealing with health and wellness issues. Our Substance Abuse and Mental Health Resource Center is already featured on DRI’s main webpage. It provides online and telephone contact information to services that help lawyers, friends, and family with problems related to their mental health, substance abuse, or addiction.

SOLACE Program in DRI

Kolly: Susan, I know that some professions have developed national programs that have proved successful and have been widely adopted within the profession. Have you found any “off-the-rack” programs, as it were, for the legal community that are attractive to the DRI for Life Committee?

Gunter: Yes, there is a program called SOLACE, which stands for “Support of Lawyers/Legal Personnel All Concern Encouraged.” This is a program started by lawyers to help lawyers and legal personnel and their families in times of crisis. Many DRI members will be familiar with SOLACE, which is already operational in almost half of America’s state bar associations. We wanted to make this service formally available to DRI members as well. We know from past experience that DRI members want to help their colleagues through difficult times, with help ranging from offering office space, secretarial help, and air miles, to drives to medical appointments. SOLACE is an informal email system that allows us to get the word out about the needs of lawyers suffering from a...
And how do you get people to Let me emphasize one other—that will serve as a resource
More. Using the founda
can connect DRI seminar attendees with vide an informal
Gunter banquet hall to engage in networking on a similar activity to get attendees out of the tees have indicated a desire to incorporate Arizona (which Susan participated in) as a Women in the Law Committee held an or
tivities that can be officially incorporated to our committee, can be used in program

to DRI members on wellness and professional development. The information a lawyer needs on these topics at one career point isn’t the same as it is ten years later. Over the last two years, we have developed a white paper entitled Career Path that will serve as a resource document for topics of interest tailored to lawyers’ seniority, which can be used by all of DRI to help inform programming, publications, and initiatives.

Initially under the leadership of Chris Kenney, this group set out to provide a framework for educational offerings tailored to where a lawyer is in his or her own career. For young lawyers, emerging partners, and senior partners, the Career Path hopes to focus on DRI member’s education needs and interests—not for substantive law education—but rather for professional and personal development. We recognize that at each stage of our careers, these needs and interests are different. DRI members have asked for more information on work–life balance and managing the demands of a busy practice with a fulfilling personal life. The Career Path white paper starts the DRI discussion about targeting professional development and wellness resources to the “age and stage” of DRI members. It contains ideas for new programming and connects existing DRI resources to the right time period in a litigator’s career.

DRI for Life Career Path

Kolly: Other than the shared commonality of being attorneys, this really isn’t just one big, homogeneous group, is it? Among 22,000 members, the challenges, interests, and needs have to be very different among senior partners, managing partners, new associates, and so on. That eliminates “one size fits all” programming. Ross: Exactly. The mandate of DRI for Life is to provide resources to DRI members on wellness and professional development. The information a lawyer needs on these topics at one career point isn’t the same as it is ten years later. Over the last two years, we have developed a white paper entitled Career Path that will serve as a resource document for topics of interest tailored to lawyers’ seniority, which can be used by all of DRI to help inform programming, publications, and initiatives.

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DRI Substantive Law Committee Input to DRI for Life

Sweeney: Let me emphasize one other point. Over the last year, DRI for Life has grown in size and the scope of its endeavors. We are ready to seek input from DRI’s well-established substantive law committees. Each of DRI’s 29 substantive law committees will appoint a liaison to DRI for Life. We believe this will help us to communicate with the SLCs and weave the DRIFL values into the larger DRI culture. We are excited about growing our committee and about getting more people involved. We want to nurture careers, but we also want to improve lives.

Gunter: It’s personal.
Sweeney: It’s personal.