

REPORTS OF SPECIAL COMMITTEES

SPECIAL COMMITTEE ON PUBLICATIONS AND PUBLIC INFORMATION

Thomas Edward Spahn, Chair

In addition to continuing some programs we initiated last year, our committee rolled out an award-winning series of public service announcements highlighting the help that lawyers can provide to Virginians from every walk of life.

Two years ago we started Virginia's first statewide Speakers' Bureau. Laura Dalpino of the Virginia State Bar maintains the database of interested lawyers and audiences, and has been very successful in soliciting Virginia State Bar members to speak at schools, civic groups, professional organizations, etc. So far, nearly 400 lawyers have volunteered to speak and many have spoken at one or more engagements. We will continue to solicit lawyers through notices in the *Virginia Lawyer/Register* and other publications and events. The Speakers' Bureau is part of our committee's effort to highlight Virginia lawyers' willingness to volunteer their time to educate the public about legal matters that might affect them.

Another component of this effort has been our annual Law in Society Award Competition, cosponsored by the Litigation Section. In January 1999, high school students from across the state were invited to read a hypothetical written by committee member Mark Cummings about the "right to die" issues implicated when someone appears to be in a vegetative state. With Laura Dalpino's help, we generated an enormous interest in the contest. Almost 300 high school students sent in essays—a 400% increase over the previous year. Thanks to the Virginia State Bar Litigation Section's generosity, the winning essayist received a \$1,000 savings bond, and nine other Virginia high school students also received prizes. Students were awarded their prizes at local bar meetings by presenters ranging from local bar presidents to the judges of the Rockbridge County Circuit Court to Virginia Supreme Court Justice Harry Carrico.

Our committee is currently assisting the Bankruptcy Section in preparing a video emphasizing the importance of full disclosure by individuals declaring bankruptcy. We stand ready to help any other bar group who would like to prepare a videotape. Committee members Mark Cummings and Jay Brown have extensive experience in preparing videotapes of this nature, and can bring unique talents to bear for any bar group who is interested.

By far the highlight of last year's work was our completion of a series of public service announcements that highlight Virginia lawyers' ability to help all Virginians. Several years ago, committee member Tom Papa used his contacts to approach Virginia Commonwealth University's Adcenter in Richmond, which agreed to take on lawyers as a "class project." The Adcenter had received more than 100 requests for such free assistance, and turned all of them down before accepting our request for help (apparently they felt that the campaign to improve lawyers' image was too great a challenge to turn down).

Graduate students volunteered their time to prepare a campaign theme, which the committee approved. Committee members then chose from one of three campaigns presented by competing groups of students, and worked with the students as they selected models to be pictured in each announcement and fine-tuned the message to accompany each photograph. We are especially proud that our committee raised all of the necessary funds from private sources to pay for the actual cost of producing the camera-ready public service announcements. Adcenter officials have estimated that the work their students performed would normally have cost as much as \$200,000.

The finished product has received nationwide acclaim. The campaign won a bronze trophy in the student category of the national ATHENA (Award to Honor Excellence in Newspaper Advertising) competition sponsored by the Newspaper Association of America, one of the country's most prestigious competitions. Our campaign was also featured in a lengthy article in the fall 1999 edition of *Bar Leader*, which is published by the ABA for bar association officials across the country. In Virginia, lengthy articles about the campaign appeared in *Virginia Lawyers Weekly*, *The Virginian-Pilot* and *Style Weekly*.

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After preparing the public service announcements, the committee took steps to raise money for a May 2000 statewide campaign, prepared by Rod Coggin, in major newspapers around the state. The Litigation Section has agreed to support the campaign with a \$10,000 donation, and the Fellows of the Virginia Law Foundation recently awarded a \$10,000 grant as well. This should allow the committee to arrange for an ambitious campaign during Law Week 2000. In the meantime, the committee has prepared posters that are being circulated by a number of local bar associations, and has also published some of the public service announcements in the *Virginia Lawyer*.

Interest in purchasing our campaign has come from state bars across the country including the country's two largest bar associations (New York and California). We hope to sell rights to the campaign to these other bars, and use the funds to increase visibility of the campaign here in Virginia.

The committee expresses its appreciation to our State Bar staff liaison Rod Coggin, who provided tremendous assistance in all aspects of our work last year especially with the completion of the public service announcement campaign. ❀