

The Law Building



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I was fortunate to be introduced to the law in “The Law Building.” It was located directly across from the courthouse in Alexandria. In 1972, it contained the juvenile court, general district court, circuit court and the lockup. My five kids were twelve to nineteen years old in 1973, when I worked there as a temporary secretary. My eldest was attending William and Mary and one brother and two sisters soon followed. I first applied for the reading program in 1974 and started reading on my own. I was approved in 1975, read under James Lowe (I was able to work for the attorney I read under) and passed the bar in 1978.

The Law Building was fertile ground for young lawyers and would-be lawyers. Judge Daniel F. O’Flaherty,* who was a general district court judge, owned the building and often stopped in after the workday to chat with lawyers. The top floor held a mostly business-oriented firm: UCC, real estate, civil litigation, etc., except for a family law attorney who often brought her young granddaughter to work with her. The front of the first floor, held a lobby filling the width of the building. In the rear of the first floor there were offices for general and criminal practice firms. On the ground floor, there were sole practitioners (each office had a cubicle in front for the secretary) who practiced everything from real estate to domestic law. My introduction to the Law Building was in one of those cubicles.

The building’s location across from the courthouse made it a logical place for clients to seek legal help. The building receptionist directed people to lawyers, so we learned to be on good terms with her. It was a fabulous place to begin practicing law. If a client had a problem in an unfamiliar area of the law, there was an attorney for seek advice and help, or, if advisable, to refer the matter. Practical advice was routinely available as well: who was the clerk in the circuit court to approach for a rush job or other favor; which judge was favored for a delicate criminal case; and what was the most effective approach to take in the sentencing hearing. The building became the place to go after work and hash over the day’s cases, tell war stories, or ask for advice from the seasoned attorneys who had offices there—whether one was a law student, clerk, or new attorney and whether or not one actually had an office there.

It also provided a rich education in human nature. I soon learned which clients to avoid and why, without having to learn the hard way—on my own. Every day disclosed a new facet of the human

condition and unfortunate personal mistakes. The building was within walking distance of a large community of black families whose ancestors had been there for generations, and, like Rumpole, attorneys often represented sons and daughters, brothers and sisters of former clients in domestic and small criminal matters. It helped to know the family dynamic in assessing a case and assisting the client.

Many who were sole practitioners or working for small firms became judges: John Kloch became Alexandria’s commonwealth’s attorney and is now a circuit court judge; Teena Grodner clerked for Gwendolyn Jo Carlberg, became an associate, started her own firm, and is a juvenile court judge in Fairfax County; Gerald Lee came to the building as a law clerk, became a Fairfax County Circuit Court judge and is a judge for the Fourth Circuit Federal District Court in Alexandria; Stephen W. Rideout is chief judge of the Alexandria Juvenile Court; and Gordon P. Peyton is commissioner of accounts for the City of Alexandria.

The building was fertile in other ways—Betty Molchany was a sole practitioner there, and her office was often the meeting place for the women who started the Virginia Women Attorney’s Association. Dulcie Fowler of Charlottesville had suggested to Betty that such an organization was needed, Janis MacDonald of Phil Hirschkopf’s office agreed and the pioneers met either at Janis’s or Betty’s office, where they discussed, planned, stuffed envelopes and grew rapidly.

The Virginia College of Criminal Attorneys also was “hatched” in the Law Building. Marvin Miller, Jim Lowe, Bill Moffitt and John Flowers Mark helped give a voice for the criminal defense bench. I was involved in the genesis of both groups. Life was exciting and stimulating. Moreover, it was great fun.

The Law Building is now the trust department of a local bank, and Alexandria is no longer the small southern city it once was. The West End is the site of associations of one sort and another, as its location is convenient for those interesting in lobbying Congress. ☺

*Judge O’Flaherty sold the building not too long after, when he became uncomfortable about potentially appointing attorneys (who paid him rent) to criminal cases.