

Not Just Passing Through



Tracy A. Giles 2000–2001 Young Lawyers Conference President

Eight years ago, as a newly minted young lawyer, I attended my first VSB Annual Meeting in Virginia Beach. At that time I was searching for two things. The first thing I hoped to find was knowledge, about the law and the practice of law. My second goal was to find a way, outside of my law practice, to use my new law license to make a difference in people's lives. In short, I wanted to know what it took to be a good lawyer.

I had taken the bar and passed it (whew!) the previous fall. Not knowing any better, I had hung out my shingle the following spring with one partner, Malissa Lambert, my then-future wife. I had a couple of things going for me, a smart partner and an idea of the specific niche of law in which I wanted to practice. But what I didn't have was practical knowledge about running a law firm or handling clients or handling myself as a lawyer. Like almost all young lawyers, I had a lot to learn about the practice of law in the real world. They don't teach you much of that in law school. I wasn't in a big firm, I couldn't just walk down the hall and ask someone how they had handled my problem the last 50 times they'd seen it. And I had gone to law school out of state, so most of my classmates practiced elsewhere. The advice I got from them was useful but had limited application to how we do things here in the Commonwealth. I needed to get to know other lawyers in Virginia. Mentors, examples and role models. Friends I could ask practical questions.

The gems I found at that first meeting have grown over the years to become an embarrassment of riches. Bar service has allowed me to meet great lawyers who have become good friends. I refer especially to my colleagues on the board and committees of the VSB Young Lawyers Conference, who work so hard to help better their profession and their communities while keeping up with demanding law practices. I think of the commitment shown by past YLC leaders such as Sharon Moon, Robert Ballou, Jack Holleran, Shireen Kirk and Tracy Walker. These are people with whom I have become friends over the years, but whose examples still challenge me. I look with admiration at the continuing service of former YLC volunteers like Judge Pam Sargent and John Johnson. When I think of the talent of upcoming conference leaders, such as O'Kelly McWilliams, Lori Elliot and Katie Uston, I realize that the best is yet to come.

I also think of friends from other bar associations such as Harry (Pete) Johnson, of The Virginia Bar Association Young Lawyers

Division. A few years ago, after severe flooding in western Virginia, Pete and I spent days trapped with each other in my wife's 4X4, driving from one FEMA disaster center to another helping organize volunteer legal assistance for the flood victims—an interesting way to make a friend.

I think of the once young lawyers I've gotten to know like Robert Grey, a former president of the Young Lawyers Conference who went on to chair the American Bar Association's House of Delegates. In addition to leading the more than 400 members of that body with tremendous skill, diplomacy, and grace, Robert has the additional distinction of being the first African-American chair. While accomplishing all of this, he has taken the time to be a role model, friend and mentor to many young lawyers, including myself.

I think of leaders of the Virginia State Bar I've come to admire like Mike Smith, Ed Lowry, John Keith, Scott Street and especially this year's president, Joe Condo, whom I've gotten to know particularly well.

Were it not for my involvement with the organized bar, chances are I would not have met these people, much less become friends with them and had the opportunity to learn from them.

The second thing I was seeking at my first annual meeting was the opportunity to use my law degree to make a difference outside of my law practice. Most of us go to law school with high ideals of changing the world and helping our fellow man. Sometimes the realities of modern legal practice and the twin tyrants of bills and the billable hour can all but beat these dreams out of you. I was hoping to find a project that spoke to me; one I could roll up my sleeves and commit to without hesitation. I found more than I bargained for in the fledgling emergency legal services program. As you may know, this is a program run by young lawyers to assist disaster victims with housing, insurance claims and other legal issues arising from floods, hurricanes, tornadoes and other devastating events.

One summer afternoon many years ago, my grandfather's small farm was hit by a series of violent storms and tornadoes. In a few hours the crops, barns, and other buildings were destroyed. It was during the Great Depression, and there was little money to

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begin with, much less to rebuild. The insurance didn't pay off, and the bank foreclosed. So my grandfather had to return to tenant farming, and my father, instead of going to college, went to work in a textile mill to help pay off the debt and keep the family afloat.

Now as a young lawyer, the emergency legal assistance program would give me the opportunity to help other families avoid what mine had endured. As I watched families line up at disaster centers, among their tired and worried faces, I saw my father as a young man. I was using my education to repay a debt I owed him from all those years before. Because of lawyer volunteers, some young man's family would hold on to their home, their farm, their dreams.

My story is not unique or even special. Young men and women graduate from law school and pass the bar every year with their own dreams of making a difference, of learning from wise mentors, of making good friends while doing good work. At its best, this is what the organized bar should provide. It should be a vehicle that brings young, and not so young, lawyers together, to channel their energies and talents to better our profession and the society our profession serves. For me, as Robert Frost said, it has made all the difference. 🍷