

Dennis W. “Denny” Dohnal

1945 – 2015

Dennis W. “Denny” Dohnal, a pivotal figure in the history of the Virginia State Bar, died May 10, 2015. Judge Dohnal was born October 10, 1945, and was a graduate of Bucknell University and the George Washington University Law School.

He began his career as an assistant US attorney, became a partner in the firm of Bremner, Baber and Janus, and later director of the firm Brenner, Dohnal, Evans and Yoffy. He was a US magistrate judge for the United States District Court for the Eastern District of Virginia. After retiring from the bench, he was a mediator with The McCammon Group. He also served as president of The Bar Association of the City of Richmond, the Richmond Criminal Bar Association, The John Marshall American Inn of Court, and on many committees for the Virginia State Bar. He received the Harry L. Carrico Professionalism Award from the Virginia State Bar, the Virginia Lawyers Weekly Leader in the Law Award, and the Hunter W. Martin Professionalism Award from The Bar Association of the City of Richmond.

Among his many contributions to the bar was serving as chair of the Special Committee to Study the Virginia Code of Professional Responsibility, which drafted the Rules of Professional Conduct. James M. McCauley, bar ethics counsel, remembered that Judge Dohnal “was brilliant with his strategy in persuading Council to approve and recommend adoption of the rules by the Supreme Court of Virginia.” He presented the proposed rules to Council in three installments over three consecutive Council meetings, injecting humor at each meeting. “At one meeting he came dressed as Moses and had tablets containing the ‘new rules.’ The second time, Judge Dohnal and Tom Spahn showed up as Jake and Ellwood, the Blues Brothers playing ‘Soul Man.’ The third

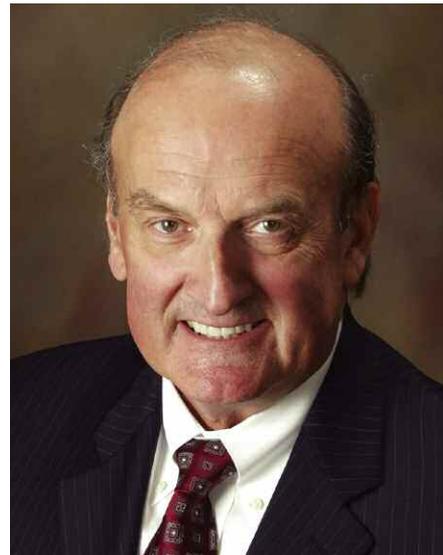
time, he wore the red and white striped hat from Dr. Seuss’s ‘The Cat in the Hat’ carrying a bottle of Jack Daniels, which he slammed down on the podium, saying, ‘now let’s get down to some serious business, shall we?’” McCauley added that the adoption of the rules in 1999 was an important milestone for the legal profession in the Commonwealth of Virginia.

Thomas E. Spahn, a partner at McGuireWoods LLP, wrote that, “I observed at every meeting Judge Dohnal’s penetrating intellect and practical approach to resolving disagreements. He was so affable and courteous that it would have been easy to overlook his comprehensive understanding of the ethics rules and how they affect lawyers in their everyday practice.”

Judge Dohnal used humor to lighten the debate, Spahn said, “but never at the expense of a serious discussion of our profession’s guiding principles.

“One of my favorite pictures shows Judge Dohnal and me dressed as the ‘Blues Brothers’ — preparing to describe the new rules to the Chesterfield Bar Association. His wild imagination and theatrical flair delighted that audience, as it did countless other Virginia lawyers.

“To me, Judge Dohnal epitomized the ideal Virginia lawyer — smart, courteous to everyone with whom he dealt, self-effacing, and dedicated to our profession and to our communities.”



Denny Dohnal & Rodney Leffler