

Unlocking Our Potential



I CAN HARDLY BELIEVE that another bar year has come to a close, ending not only my term as president of the Young Lawyers Conference, but also my time as a young lawyer.

When I began as president at last year's annual meeting, I adopted the theme "Unlocking Our Potential" to achieve excellence, as attorneys and as a conference. As we closed the year celebrating the conference's thirty-fifth anniversary, then Virginia State Bar President-elect Jon D. Huddleston made us realize we had already achieved excellence.

Last July, we had another successful Oliver Hill/Samuel Tucker Prelaw Institute at the University of Richmond. The institute has now served more than one hundred minority high school students through a summer camp that introduces them to a legal career. The success of this program is evident in the record number — eighty-three students — who applied for twenty-four openings in the 2009 institute. The institute reached a milestone with a field trip to the White House to visit Virginia native Melody C. Barnes, the president's domestic policy adviser and director of his Domestic Policy Council.

Answering VSB President Manuel A. Capsalis's challenge to increase diversity in the profession, the YLC expanded our award-winning Minority Prelaw Conference by adding a program in eastern Virginia at the College of William and Mary to our successful southwest Virginia program at Washington and Lee University, and northern Virginia program at George Mason University. All three programs

were a success, with record attendance in southwest and northern Virginia.

We continued the tradition of successful Women and Minorities in the Profession bench bar dinners. This year's celebration honored the thirteen newly elected women and minority judges in the commonwealth. Justice S. Bernard Goodwyn of the Supreme Court of Virginia served as our keynote speaker.

Our Women and Minorities in the Profession Commission is exploring why women leave the practice of law, and will report its findings in a future article in *Virginia Lawyer* magazine or *Docket Call* newsletter.

And we implemented an American Bar Association program for high school students, titled "Choose Law: A Profession for All." This program encourages individuals of color to become attorneys by teaching the importance of the legal profession and how the law affects all aspects of their lives.

We also focused on unlocking the potential of YLC members to be excellent attorneys, beginning with the re-introduction of the improved Professional Development Conference in September. By moving the conference to Richmond in the fall, we were able to draw an exciting array of speakers to live up to the conference's theme, "Learning from the Masters."

We implemented a project launched by the ABA designed to aid young lawyers in determining whether they have chosen the right career path, and if necessary, provide resources to aid in successful career transitions. This program focused on helping young lawyers determine whether and

how they should start solo practices. We provided on our website a resource guide developed by the ABA Young Lawyers Division, and hosted a seminar at the VSB Annual Meeting with a panel of solo practitioners who shared their experiences and practical tips.

More than a thousand people were admitted to practice law in Virginia at our largest ever fall Admission and Orientation Ceremony at the Richmond Convention Center. The next day, we continued the tradition of cosponsoring the First Day in Practice continuing legal education seminar with the VSB General Practice Section. This spring, another two hundred lawyers were admitted in the Admission and Orientation Ceremony.

We continued building on our existing programs to provide service to the public in a wide variety of areas. Our Immigrant Outreach Committee conducted its award-winning CLE programs on the Immigration Consequences of Criminal Convictions. The programs in Loudoun and Fairfax counties generated revenue for the YLC for the first time. As a testament to the program's success, the ABA appears to have copied the program, including panel speakers for its own CLE.

The Wills for Heroes program, which has now written more than a thousand wills for first responders across the commonwealth, expanded to Portsmouth and Hanover and Henrico counties. We are assisting Mississippi young lawyers to implement a similar program in their state.

YLC continued on page 53

We were fortunate that Virginia did not experience any natural disasters to trigger the Emergency Legal Services Committee's action plans. However, the committee conducted ELS training to ensure that in the event of a disaster, our volunteers will be prepared.

We ensured the continued success of these and many other programs through a new five-year long-range plan, as well as a newly revamped website. And we ended the year with another tradition — hosting a debate between attorney general candidates Kenneth T. Cuccinelli II and Stephen C. Shannon.

As one of my last acts as conference president, I was proud to vote to adopt the establishment of a diversity conference. In speaking in support of the new Diversity Conference, I reminded the VSB Council, as I reminded the Young Lawyers Conference a year ago, that diversity encompasses more than just gender, racial, and ethnic diversity. In my time with the young lawyers, we have also focused on achieving diversity of region, practice type, and — naturally — age.

Virginia young lawyers have been responsible for some of the most dramatic events in American history:

- At age thirty-three, Thomas Jefferson wrote the Declaration of Independence, which declared not only America's liberty from England, but the unalienable rights of a free people and their relationship to government.
- At age thirty-six, James Madison drafted the Virginia Plan that formed the basis of our government. Madison became the father of the U.S. Constitution and one of the principal authors of *The Federalist Papers* that led to its ratification. Two years later, he drafted the Bill of Rights.
- At age thirty-five, Spottswood W. Robinson III joined Oliver W. Hill Sr. as counsel to students at segregated R.R. Moton High School in Farmville, who walked out of their dilapidated school. The subsequent lawsuit, *Davis v. School Board of Prince Edward County*, was consolidated with four other cases decided under *Brown v. Board of Education*

in 1954. The thirty-eight-year-old Robinson made the first argument before the U.S. Supreme Court on behalf of the plaintiffs.

It is my sincere hope that as the Virginia State Bar continues its efforts to ensure diversity in the bar, it focuses as well on expanding the involvement of young lawyers beyond the YLC. I feel confident that young lawyers stand ready to serve.

In this, my last article as president of the Young Lawyers Conference, I end with the call I gave to those newly admitted lawyers at the Admission and Orientation Ceremony who seek to make an impact on our profession — with apologies to Longfellow and Jefferson:

The profession, with all its fears, with all the hopes of future years, is hanging breathless on thy fate! So come forward, then, and give us the aid of your talents and the weight of your character towards the establishment of excellence in the profession. ■