President’s Message
by George Warren Shanks

Mentoring — A Shared Responsibility

I BEGIN MY BRIEF JOURNEY as your president with much more hope than concern, with much more anticipation than angst, and with a certainty that I am the incredibly fortunate successor and beneficiary of my friend and mentor, Irving M. Blank. There are times in history when momentous events are arrayed against a person of uncommon ability, when the struggle could go either way, and the presence and fortitude of one courageous soul garners the victory. If ever there was a time for the Virginia State Bar to need Irv Blank it was in the just-ended fiscal year. We owe him all the plaudits the bar can muster, for without him surely we would be twenty-one judges and $5 million poorer.

I propose to write these columns in three sections: about messages, about people, and about programs. Irv Blank gives me more than enough copy to write about people. He is an engaging speaker, a delightful storyteller, and a brilliant lawyer. As the face of the Virginia legal profession last year, our mandatory bar was immediately recognized and respected as he travelled around the commonwealth and across the country carrying our message of excellence and fiscal responsibility. But Irv also provides me with a segue into programs for, as I said, Irv is my mentor. By observing Irv, listening to his message, and analyzing his delivery, I began to appreciate how to carry off the significant responsibility as state bar president with style, grace and good humor. Which proves you’re never too old to learn.

Mentoring should be among the highest priorities of the bar. For us to perpetuate our profession in the image we wish to be perceived, we must start with our newest members and inculcate in them the values we most admire. Ours is one of the ancient “learned professions.” Law, medicine, and theology were recognized as the professions requiring both specialized training and a corresponding fiduciary obligation of service to the community. If popular media truly reflects the prevailing public attitude towards our profession, it appears we may have lost our way. Whether art imitates life or life imitates art, the portrayal of lawyers on television and in cinema should make us cringe. Certainly, our annually poor Gallup polling numbers for ethics and honesty should give us pause.

I do not for a moment suggest we abandon our role as zealous advocates for our clients’ causes. And ours is an adversarial profession, no matter how much we may sponsor alternative dispute resolution as a kinder, gentler way to address grievances, real and imagined. After all, the Virginia Bill of Rights, a document not known for its lyric prose, instructs “That in controversies respecting property, and in suits between man and man, trial by jury is preferable to any other, and ought to be held sacred.”

But we must not allow popular notions of what a lawyer is, how she behaves, what she says, to cloud or confuse our own definitions of civility and collegiality, best expressed by the Virginia Bar Association’s Principles of Professionalism. It should be, first and foremost, on our agenda for the initiation of young lawyers into the profession. The VSB’s Mandatory Professionalism Course is a worthy starting point. But after a day of inspirational presentations, the cold reality of clients, courts, and colleagues confronts every graduate of that mandatory continuing legal education.

The large and medium-sized firms have the institutional size and wisdom to mentor their new associates in-house. These young women and men are, after all, a valuable and expensive resource, to be guided and molded into the image the firm wishes to present. But the fact is that more than half of Virginia’s practicing lawyers are solo or in small firms, where mentoring is much less assured as a process and the results are often left to chance.

To be sure, some excellent mentoring programs are already in place: The American Inns of Court, of which Virginia Supreme Court Justice Donald W. Lemons is president, has seven inns throughout Virginia, the Harrisonburg-Rockingham Bar Association has sustained an award-winning mentoring program for more than two decades, the Virginia Law Foundation sponsored a Fellows Mentor Program for years, the Metropolitan Richmond Women’s Bar Association attributes its thirty-five years of growth and success to mentoring, and the Virginia Beach Bar Association sponsors a program, to mention but a few.

All these programs have in common the design to bring together “an individual with potential and an individual with expertise.”

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Law Foundation Fellows Mentor Program Handbook states: “A mentor is an advisor, trainer, and teacher. A good mentor is both a good person and a good lawyer. In the legal arena, the mentor is someone who is able to guide a young attorney in the practice of law, give the young attorney instructional advice about local laws and customs, and help the mentee to grow personally, as well as professionally.”

This is not a subject taught in law schools. It is certainly not a subject heralded by the producers of popular entertainment. I propose that it become a shared responsibility of every local, regional and specialty bar. To that end during this coming year, I will attempt to draw together the programs and projects which appear to be working, to analyze those that have been attempted without success, and, finally, to bring together practitioners, clerks, and judges from around the state to create a blueprint for mentoring, much as Bill Wilson of Covington has done with great success to promote his Senior Citizens Law Day Program. We owe it to the public, to ourselves, and to the legacy we share as protectors of the system of self-governance and democracy that Lincoln described as “the last best hope of earth.”

Endnotes:
2 Constitution of Virginia, Article I, Section 11
4 American Inns of Court, http://www.innsofcourt.org/
5 Metropolitan Richmond Women’s Bar Association, http://www.mrwba.org/
6 University of Minnesota, Teaching Ethics for Research, Scholarship and Practice, Mentoring Subcommittee, February 9, 2009.