

Her Father's Faith and Support Leads Nelson to the VSB Presidency

by Gordon Hickey

THE DAY SHARON D. NELSON graduated from Georgetown Law Center, her father stood on the campus lawn with a big grin on his face. “My daughter the lawyer,” he said. “I like the sound of that.”

It was an unlikely event. Her father, Gullmar “Gull” Nelson, rose from the immigrant slums of Hartford to become a scholar and an electrical engineer. She had an English degree from Tufts University and a history of being something of a rabble rouser. She was an activist against the Vietnam War and had even started an underground newspaper, called Ariel, while in high school in Marshfield, Mass. She remembers arguments with her father over the great issues of the day. “We had many because we were intellectually on different poles. ... I was organizing sit-ins and demonstrations and marches. This was somewhat mysterious to Dad though he admired my hard work and passion.”

couldn't distribute the papers on school property. He had done his research and he was right.

Gull Nelson was a big fan of his daughter and understood that she had the gift of intelligence and the ability to argue her point forcefully. One day, she remembers, he said to her wryly, “Anybody who can BS like you can BS needs to go to law school.” She did, graduating from Georgetown in 1978.

Most lawyers can tell you about a mentor who led them along and helped them in their studies or in developing their legal practice. That person for Nelson was her father.

He always had the highest expectations for her. “This was a man who got mad at me if I played nurse. He would ask, ‘Why aren't you the doctor?’”

“He wanted me to not be on the sidelines, not sit and watch television. ... This guy was determined that I was going to turn out OK,” Nelson said. He

when she was in the sixth grade. She worked with the librarian to teach the children the Dewey Decimal System so that they could put returned books away. “It gave them a sense of worth,” she said. “It also occurred to me that all these ‘simple-minded’ kids would be in Heaven while I was still marshaling my best arguments for St. Peter. That was a sobering thought.” As a college volunteer while at Tufts, she taught physical education classes at the Perkins School for the Blind in Watertown, Mass. She was a Girl Scout leader for seventeen years and brought three troops all the way through high school. She was a member of the PTA who held a host of offices and became its president. She and her husband are now court-appointed special advocates for abused and neglected children (CASAs) where they are working on their fourth case.

Her history of service will continue after she leaves the presidency of the bar. She will then become the president of the Fairfax Law Foundation, the philanthropic arm of the Fairfax Bar Association.

During and after law school, Nelson worked in the General Counsel's Office of the Library of Congress, and loved it. But, life intruded. The first of her three daughters, Kelly, was born in 1979 with a serious medical condition that required Nelson to quit working and take care of her. Kelly was declared uninsurable. “The doctor took me aside and said, ‘I know that you're a lawyer but you're going to have to stay home for at least four or five years and you're going to have to watch her and monitor her because no one else will like a mother will.’” The surgeon waived his fees, which Nelson called “a remarkable act of kindness.” She spent a lot of time at the hospital and started helping out with the other babies as a

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No matter how her dad felt, she remembers that when the vice principal of her high school confiscated all the issues of her newspaper her father came to her defense. “My father, who did not agree with me, went to the vice principal's office and argued the First Amendment, and he emerged with all of my underground newspapers, and brought them home to me.” He told her she could say what she wanted to say, but

warned her that smart people tend to think that being smart is good enough. “God is not going care that you're smart, he's not going to care if you're powerful, he's not going to care if you have money,” she quoted him as saying. “All God is going to look at is how good a heart you have.”

Nelson has a long history of service to her community. She started a library club for special education students –



Jason and Natalia Simek and sons Cash and Jordan

way to pay back the kindness of the surgeon and the nurses. The hospital staff brought in a table, chair, paper and a typewriter, and “they all lined up” for legal advice and assistance with wills, divorces, custody issues, leases and other concerns. “That’s really where I got my start as a solo practitioner, in Fairfax Hospital.”

“I thought that was a pretty remarkable beginning,” she said. She has had a general practice ever since, though it is secondary these days to her work on digital forensics and information security. In 1997, John Simek persuaded her to form a company with him called Sensei Enterprises Inc. In 1999 it became their full-time jobs. Sensei is a digital forensics, information security, and information technology company. Their office is in Fairfax, though they are on the road speaking and educating lawyers much of the time. In the last seven years, they have written ten books and hundreds of articles, with two more book contracts in hand.

She said she decided to run for the office of president at the urging of VSB Executive Director Karen A. Gould. “She came to me and said, have you noticed that there hasn’t been a woman president for a while?” Nelson had years earlier become a member of the Council and didn’t stop to consider that it might be a training ground for future presidents of the bar.

She had no specific agenda in mind when she agreed to run for the office.

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Sharon D. Nelson

President, Sensei Enterprises Inc.
Law Offices of Sharon D. Nelson

Education

Georgetown University Law Center, J.D., 1978
Tufts University, B.A., 1974

Experience

Virginia State Bar: President-elect, Executive Committee member, Standing Committee on Budget and Finance member, former chair of the Committee on Technology in the Practice of Law, former chair of the Unauthorized Practice of Law Committee, former member of the MCLE Board.

Court-Appointed Special Advocate for abused and neglected children.

President, Fairfax Bar Association, 2004–05.

Member, Virginia Statewide E-filing Advisory Committee for the Supreme Court of Virginia.

Member of the Virginia State Bar Association, American Bar Association, Fairfax Bar Association, Women in Technology, Virginia Trial Lawyers Association, Virginia Women Attorneys Association.

Chair, American Bar Association TechShow board, 2006

Member, American Bar Association’s Standing Committee on Technology and Information Systems (2011–present)

Chair, Education Board of the Law Practice Management Section of the ABA (2011–present)

Former Member, Governing Council of the Law Practice Management Section of the ABA (2006–2011)

Former Chair, Publications Board of the Law Practice Management Section of the ABA (2007–2009)

Member, American Bar Association’s Advisory Panel (2007–present)

Director, Fairfax Law Foundation (2005–present).

Community Service

CASA Investors Circle (2010–present)

Founder of Give Me Wings and I Can Fly – rehabbing used computers in partnership with Microsoft to give the computers to economically disadvantaged children and families (2001–present)

Sponsor of Jazz for Justice for 10 Years

Annual sponsor of CASA’s Run for the Children

Annual sponsor of the Fairfax Law Foundation’s Run for Justice

Annual sponsor of Langley Residential Services Fundraiser for Intellectually Disabled Adults

Annual sponsor of Special Olympics

Annual sponsor of Chipping In to End Domestic Violence Golf Tournament

Lab rescue of L.R.C.P. Vice President (2006–2008)

Led three Girl Scout troops over seventeen years, taking all troops through high school graduation

Held numerous PTA positions, including president

Soccer coach for many years

Captained teams for the Walk for the Homeless for many years

Books

Co-author of *The 2012 Legal Technology Guide for Solo and Small Law Firms* (2012 ABA Publishing)

Co-author of *Locked Down: Information Security for Lawyers* (2012 ABA Publishing)

Co-author of *The 2011 Legal Technology Guide for Solo and Small Law Firms* (2011 ABA Publishing)

Co-author of *The 2010 Legal Technology Guide for Solo and Small Law Firms* (2010 ABA Publishing)

Co-author of *How Good Lawyers Survive in Bad Times* (2009, ABA Publishing)

Co-author of *The 2009 Legal Technology Guide for Solo and Small Law Firms*. (2009 ABA Publishing)

Co-author of *The 2008 Legal Technology Guide for Solo and Small Law Firms* (2008, ABA Publishing)

Co-author of *The Electronic Evidence and Discovery Handbook* (2006, ABA Publishing)

Co-author and co-editor of *Information Security for Lawyers and Law Firms* (2006, ABA Publishing)

Other Publications

Co-author of *Hot Buttons*, a bi-monthly column appearing in *Law Practice Magazine* (ABA Law Practice Management Section Publication)

Regular columnist for the Canadian legal blog SLAW

Author: *Ride the Lightning: Electronic Evidence* blog (2007–present), which has twice been named one of the country’s top 100 legal blogs by the American Bar Association and which is archived by the Library of Congress and made available through its collections to scholarly researchers.

Co-editor, *Bytes in Brief*, an electronic law and technology newsletter (1997–2012)

Co-author of more than 200 articles on legal technology and computer forensics published around in the world in more than 100 legal and business publications

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Though, “I’ve already hit an iceberg and I’m not even there. My iceberg is the fact that we’ve lost our lease.” The VSB offices will be moving out of their long-time location next year. The new location has yet to be determined, but Nelson knows the move will take up a good deal of the staff’s time and attention and will inevitably have an impact on her term.

She also said that “an agenda has been foisted upon me. ... I have received all sorts of phone calls saying, we hope that you will help to teach us about legal technology and keeping our client data confidential.”

She also wants to produce trial run informational videos that answer the questions that are most commonly asked by people, and to have those in English with Spanish subtitles. Increasingly, when people ask questions on the Internet they would often prefer to get the answers on video rather than reading. In fact, younger people frequently do most of their Internet searches on YouTube and not on Google. Examples that are in the process of production are on the *Senior Citizens Handbook*, the *So You’re 18* brochure, the Clients’ Protection Fund, Fee Dispute Resolution Program, and the Virginia Lawyer Referral Service.

She also expects she’ll be asked to do a fair amount of speaking. “Speaking is a large part of what I do,” Nelson said. “I would like specifically to go and talk to law students. They’re scared for their futures, it’s heartbreaking. ... I like giving them hope. They feel they’re not getting a lot of help with pragmatic skills. They don’t know how to write resumes; they don’t know how to use social media to find a job; they don’t know that they can get certified in an area related to the law. ... There are a lot of things they can do to complement their legal education that will make them more valuable to an employer.”

Outgoing President W. David Harless also had begun plans for a strategic commission, or task force, on

the future of law. She expects to inherit that commission from him.

In short, she expects to be very busy. “They don’t show you the travel schedule until you’ve said yes,” she said, laughing.

Nelson and Simek married in 2004. They are a family that includes her three daughters — Kelly, Sara, and Kim — and his three sons — John Jr., Jason, and Jameson. “We feel strongly that we have six children — it’s not three are mine and three are his — they are all six ‘ours,’” she said. They have five grandchildren and another is due about Thanksgiving. “We are continuing to build a small army.”

Since becoming president-elect last year, Nelson has found the mentors she didn’t have as a young lawyer. The support of Harless and former presidents Irving M. Blank, George Warren Shanks, and Karen A. Gould “has been phenomenal. For the first time in my life I really have been mentored, mentored by people who have been through the ranks and the presidency and who have absolutely knocked themselves out to make themselves available to me, to answer my questions, to share their speeches with me. They’ve just been incredibly supportive. ... That really has

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made a huge difference in making me prepared for the job.”

Nelson’s father and mentor died in October 2012. But Nelson said she knows he’ll be watching when she’s sworn in as VSB president on June 14 at the Annual Meeting. “I know he’ll be smiling and saying, ‘My daughter, the VSB president. I like the sound of that.’”

