

President's Message

by Sharon D. Nelson



It Isn't Your Dad's (or Mom's) Law Practice Anymore: The Future of the Legal Profession

IT WAS A CELEBRATORY MOMENT in June when I had the honor to be sworn in as the 75th President of the Virginia State Bar by Supreme Court Chief Justice Cynthia D. Kinser. This was the first time a female chief justice had sworn in a female president—a hallmark of how far the profession has come in recent years.

For all those who wondered how I got here, the simple answer is that Executive Director Karen A. Gould is to blame! I had happily served the VSB for years in various positions without any thought of one day assuming its helm until she pointed out that we had a solidly male line of leaders and asked me to toss my hat in the ring.

Heaven help me, I said yes.

As for that solidly male line of leaders—Manny Capsalis, Jon Huddleston, Irv Blank, George Shanks and David Harless—they became my champions the moment they learned I had raised my hand. It is impossible to imagine better mentors, and I've been fortunate to have the counsel of former President Karen Gould as well. I have even forgiven her for recruiting me and showing me the travel schedule two weeks later.

What all presidents hope is not to find themselves captain of the Titanic. While I am far from assuming Captain Edward Smith's hat, it is true that the first iceberg for my year was struck some months ago when we learned that we would be losing our current office space at 707 East Main Street in

Richmond. While the relocation is largely a matter handled by our very competent staff, this will occupy much of their time and require the outlay of a large chunk of money. The good news is that the commercial rental market is favorable and we should be able to find a new home at a good price. I hope this is the only iceberg in my year but events have a way of overtaking expectations.

It had been my intention not to have any particular agenda during my year. Like David Harless, I agree that our primary mission is to keep a well-run ship on course. That intention did not last long as I was besieged by e-mails and phone calls urging me to help bring technology and data security awareness to the VSB (which is actually doing quite well in that regard) and to the members of the bar. So, yes, I will endeavor to reach out whenever possible to spread the gospel of legal technology and security by writing and speaking on those subjects. If you would like to have me speak to a local group, I will endeavor to say yes, bearing in mind the inordinately complicated calendar pre-ordained by the bar.

For those of you who are familiar with the American Bar Association's TECHSHOW, where my husband/partner John and I have served on the faculty for more than a decade, I am delighted to say that the VSB is planning a mini-TECHSHOW in Richmond for 2014, inviting several of that confer-

ence's most popular speakers to share their legal technology knowledge.

John and I speak across the commonwealth and nationally to bar associations and to law schools, the latter being particularly dear to our hearts. There is so much fear of the future on the part of students who are overwhelmed by gloomy statistics. There are things students can do to give themselves an edge—and we enjoy explaining the upside of a down market to them, as well as taking a crack, with our murky crystal ball, at the future of the legal profession.

It is a great tribute to David Harless, my friend and generous mentor, that he had the foresight to share the concern of so many over the future of the legal profession and therefore established a commission to study that future and to make recommendations about how to meet it. We will be losing baby boomers at an accelerating rate, with fewer lawyers replacing them. We are watching grimly as pieces of practicing law are turned into commodities—and legal advice is given via a computerized decision tree. There is much on the horizon to be studied. I am delighted that the commission will soon begin its work and look forward to reporting the results as the year advances.

As famously said by Yogi Berra, "The future ain't what it used to be." Nelson can be reached at (703) 359-0700 or snelson@senseient.com.

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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.’”

