

President's Message

by George Warren Shanks



Witness to History in the Cradle of Democracy

IN MY FIRST ARTICLE as president of the Virginia State Bar I suggested I would like to divide my column into three sections: about messages, about programs and about people. With our recently-concluded Midyear Legal Seminar in Greece I can cover all three with one topic: our first annual Rule of Law Seminar.

This year's bar-sponsored excursion to Athens, Greece, with an optional extension to Istanbul, Turkey, was nothing short of a phenomenal success. The forty-seven attorneys and nine judges, their spouses, families and guests saw events of global significance unfold before their eyes. The Hotel Grande Bretagne is on one side of Syntagma (Constitution) Square and next to the Greek Parliament. We were witnesses to the exercise of free speech in a European democracy with an ancient history of democratic institutions and a more recent history which has struggled with the challenges such liberty imposes upon society.

You may have read about the civil unrest in Greece leading up to our trip. You may have even believed that the pictures and the sound bites presented by the international press depicted a freedom-loving society in the throes of disintegration. We participants certainly heard about it before our departure. And as eye-witnesses to the events as they unfolded, I believe a poll of our group of 110 world travelers would be unanimous: the hype was sensationalism at its best. The reality was democracy at its best.

The message, then, is this: democracy in action is not always pretty, is not always accompanied by baroque chamber orchestras served up in ele-

gant drawing rooms and does not always bring out the best qualities of human emotion or behavior. But it is, as Abraham Lincoln put it, "the last, best hope of Earth." And this is what we saw, first hand, without any talking heads to interpret or spin the facts and events as they unfolded.

Before the crucial vote of confidence in the early-morning hours on November 5, which gave the Papandreou government a few more days of breathing space, there were successive demonstrations in front of the Parliament (and in front of our hotel), which culminated in a klieg-lighted nighttime rally of the Communist Party faithful, some 2,000 strong, waving red flags, making speeches on loud speakers, chanting slogans and singing folk songs — and sounding very much like a U.S. college campus demonstration in the 1960s. I looked in vain for Warren Beatty and Julie Christie. What I saw instead was a splinter group in Greek society participating in the democratic process. It is curious that we believe so strongly in our notions of western democracy and yet have such anxieties over its continued existence — much like an anxious parent enduring the growing pains of a child.

Which brings me to programs. With all the hubris of Howard Hughes who named his company "Trans World Airlines" before it had acquired a transatlantic route, I asked the Midyear Legal Seminar Committee to consider a program in conjunction with our trip which would be named "The First Annual Rule of Law Seminar."¹ With the combined efforts of Judge George D. Varoutsos of Arlington, Fairfax attorney Ed Weiner and VSB staff

members Bet Keller and Terry Patrick, in consultation with attorneys in Greece, a program of historic proportions was presented in Athens on Friday, November 4, 2011. Its description in detail is contained in the superb article by CLBA Chair Ed Weiner on page 48 of this issue of *Virginia Lawyer*.

I would propose that this type of program become a permanent part of the Midyear Legal Seminar landscape. In less than three hours, most of us learned more about the current events in Greece, their historical antecedents and the possible avenues of successful resolution than we could have learned from months of listening to the pundits. These insights came from lawyers — our international colleagues — who spoke cogently and clearly from differing perspectives, were able to disagree without being disagreeable, and who, by their presence and performance, reminded us of what an exhilarating, noble profession the practice of law is. Whatever land we visit in years to come, it will have a legal system worth studying and lawyers and judges worth befriending. Getting nine hours of CLE is nice; getting to know lawyers around the world is priceless.

Edward L. Weiner is the inspiration for this concept, even though he is too modest in his article to admit it. In every VSB-sponsored trip abroad he has taken, Ed has tried to connect with the legal community, usually on his own and sometimes at a sacrifice to missing an organized day trip to an interesting venue. He has observed trials in Rome and conversed with judges in Marbella, Spain. In an ABA-spon-

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sored trip, he visited courts and met lawyers and judges in Belgium, Luxembourg, France and England. He is an enthusiastic proponent of increasing international understanding through the export of collegiality and civility by members of the bar as they travel throughout the world.²

Ed is also an extraordinary community servant.³ He is the creator of Jazz 4 Justice, an annual concert now in its tenth year at George Mason University, which showcases the GMU Jazz Ensemble and local jazz artists as it raises money for the support of that music program and for the Fairfax Law Foundation. This year, he opened the program on a new front, premiering Jazz 4 Justice at James Madison University as a benefit for that program and for the

VSB's Diversity Conference and for Blue Ridge Legal Services. He is vice president of the Fairfax Bar Association, former president of the Fairfax Law Foundation, a fellow of the Virginia Law Foundation and was recognized in 2010 as one of Virginia's Leaders in the Law by *Virginia Lawyers Weekly*. He is the current chairman of the VSB's Conference of Local Bar Associations.

Midyear Legal Seminars are much more than self-indulgent travel. They are about personal growth and discovery. They are about collegiality and civility. And they are about meeting and interacting with members of our profession of extraordinary vitality, people like Ed Weiner.

Endnotes:

- 1 The name is attributable to the enormously-successful program created by

Mike Pace and promoted by the Virginia Bar Association, an internationally-acclaimed effort to "to fundamentally change the way students learn about the rule of law as the basis of all of our rights and responsibilities as American citizens."

- 2 And, truth be known, Ed is also a guy who finds himself in the right place at the right time, like Pug Henry in *War and Remembrance*. While working out in the Grand Bretagne's health club, he chatted up Prime Minister Georgios Papandreou, who has used the hotel's facilities for years as a quick escape from the pressures of the day across the street.
- 3 "Community Servant" was an outstanding program of the Virginia Bar Association recognizing attorneys across Virginia who contributed at least 50 hours annually to the improvement of their communities. This is one program that should be revived, like former VSB President Jon Huddleston's "Virginia is for Good Lawyers" campaign.



Photo credit: Christina Gioldasi

The Rule of Law Program at the Hotel Grande Bretagne in Athens, Greece, brought together many members of the legal profession in Greece and members of the Virginia State Bar including President George Warren Shanks pictured in the center of the back row.