

Harrisonburg-Rockingham Bar Association

Although a bar association existed in the area of Harrisonburg and Rockingham County as early as 1845, the Harrisonburg-Rockingham Bar Association, as it is known today, began in the 1950s and 60s. It became more formally organized in the 1970s, when the HRBA began its annual picnic, a lawyers-only gathering where members can enjoy each other's company in an informal setting. It was during this period that the bar gave added emphasis to its professional relationships and began honoring seniors and deceased members.

The Harrisonburg-Rockingham Bar Association continues to affirm its dedication to its "local tradition of professionalism and courtesies," as highlighted in its Principles of Professionalism. In addition to twice receiving national recognition for its service, the bar is widely recognized for its pro bono efforts, mentoring program and professionalism seminar. The HRBA has 125 members.

Pro Bono Effort

The pro bono program of the HRBA began in 1982. In 1993, the National Legal Services Corporation honored the Harrisonburg-Rockingham Bar Association by naming its entire membership the Rural Pro Bono Attorney(s) of the Year. In 1995 the bar received the American Bar Association's Harrison Tweed Award, its highest award for pro bono programs, and in 1998 the bar association received the VSB's prestigious Lewis F. Powell, Jr., Pro Bono Award.

The HRBA provides a minimum of 20 hours of civil pro bono services per each practicing member, and handles approximately 100 pro bono cases annually. Last year, members provided more than \$82,000 in donated services.

Mentor Program

Based on the concern for the loss of a small town bar "closeness," the HRBA established a mentoring program in the late 1980s, where a new lawyer (one who has been practicing in the area for less than five years) is paired with and advised by a senior lawyer. The relationship usually starts with the senior lawyer asking the young lawyer to lunch.

Approximately 82 new lawyer-senior lawyer relationships exist in the bar, with some exceeding the five-year time frame. This program is a model to other bar associations in the Commonwealth.

Professionalism Seminar

Again, based on a concern for losing the small town collegial traditions valued by older lawyers, the HRBA began its own professionalism program in 1988. Steve Blatt, then HRBA president,

Current Officers of the Harrisonburg-Rockingham Bar Association

Jenifer D. Cupp: President

Steven C. Rhodes: President-elect

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noted a senior lawyer was concerned about how growing economic pressure could indirectly force their small town bar to lose its commitment to professionalism.

"Therefore, the association agreed that we would provide a two-hour professionalism seminar each year," said Phillip C. Stone, author of the HRBA Principles of Professionalism and former HRBA president. The HRBA enlisted the attendance of local judges, then asked the senior partners to promise full attendance by their firms' members. Eventually, all members were urged to attend. "We thought this was a way to provide the mandatory annual CLE credits in ethics each year, while providing a program tailored to our needs and interests," Stone said. "We have had law school professors, Bar Counsel, judges and practitioners as speakers and panelists." (The Virginia Bar Association has employed the same format for programs used by the HRBA—case studies and the participation of local practitioners and judges—for programs for other local bars.)

Recent Resolutions

To encourage its members "to exemplify the highest tradition of personal and professional excellence in the practice of law and to dedicate themselves to the service of their community and society beyond the practice of law," the Harrisonburg-Rockingham Bar Association passed a resolution earlier this year to create and present the James R. Sipe, Sr., Community Service Award. Sipe was an admired member of the bar who demonstrated the ideals of dedicated service to his clients, the community and the legal profession until his death in February 2000.

In an effort to eliminate the risk of execution of innocent people, the HRBA asked the Virginia General Assembly and the governor to impose a moratorium on executions, and to retain such moratorium for three years to provide an opportunity to review the present system.



In recognition for his outstanding legal skills and statesmanship in cultivating positive relations across the Commonwealth among legal aid, the private bar, community groups and the public, the Virginia Legal Aid Award was presented to **John Whitfield** at the 1998 VSB annual meeting.



As president of the Harrisonburg-Rockingham Bar Association when it received the Harrison Tweed Award, **Greg St. Ours** traveled to Chicago in 1998 to receive the award. Here he is serving on a discussion panel at the 1998 Bar Leaders Institute at Washington & Lee University in Lexington.

“What is different here [in the HRBA] is that most of the lawyers have decided to live a small-town lifestyle. Many of them have given up more lucrative offers or positions in bigger cities to practice in a small town, where they will have the time and opportunity to volunteer in the community, become involved in their church, or simply spend more time with their families. Most of us have made a quality of life choice in coming to Harrisonburg to practice law, and that choice seems to underly many of our interactions with each other.”

— Jenifer Cupp
HRBA President

“The HRBA developed its program on professionalism, consisting of a mentor program for new lawyers and the professionalism seminar, not because it was experiencing a deterioration in its members’ long-standing commitment to professionalism and collegiality, but to better assure that the commitment will continue as the local bar grows so dramatically in size. We were also conscious of the reduced professionalism alleged in other parts of the state and we were determined that it should not happen here. We are simply trying to make sure that the enduring values of professionalism and collegiality will not decline in an increasingly commercial and uncivil environment. From our seniors, we inherited a strong, professional bar; we are resolved to pass it on to another generation.”

— Phil Stone
*former HRBA President and author of
Principles of Professionalism*

If you would like to let others know about the work and achievements of your local bar, please send us a brief summary of its history and current activities.

Please send to:
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