

Who's the best?

by Jeannie P. Dahnk, 2003–2004 VSB President

Who's the best divorce lawyer in the Washington area? Who's the best business lawyer in Tidewater? Who's the best personal injury attorney in Richmond? Magazine and book publishers assemble lists of who's hot, who's on top, who has celebrity or Fortune 500 clients, who has gotten the biggest verdicts. The lists are eagerly awaited and have taken on a seasonal regularity that supports a cottage industry of research, writing and advertising.

Lawyers, perhaps more than anyone else, love these lists. We love them because we compete for clients, and for the admiration of our colleagues. Maybe we love them because we are just naturally competitive. But to some extent we pay attention to the lists out of a need for some indication of our own worth. Feedback is hard to come by and benchmarks for achievement are equally elusive in the daily reality of practice. So even when we aren't on the list, we can usually find someone who is, and say to ourselves, "I'm at least as good as he is . . ."

Clients, on the other hand, know which lawyer is best—theirs. Surveys suggest that while the public image of the profession suffers, people who have been or are represented by counsel maintain an almost universally high opinion of their lawyer. Anecdotal evidence suggests that the connection clients feel with their lawyer is stronger than any similar connection with other professions. Physicians, for example, enjoy a much kinder public reputation but often do not engender the individual loyalty from their patients that clients seem to feel for their lawyers.

Why is this? How can the public revile the profession if our customers are devoted to us? The answers to this conundrum lie in the nature of the work we do—the problems we try to solve, the burdens we help to shoulder. Most members of the public view legal services as an expense to be avoided, a harbinger of unpleasantness, or worse, an accompaniment to failure. Like a dentist, a plumber, or an undertaker, a lawyer performs a service,



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which, while necessary, may take place in a context of pain, inconvenience or loss. But unlike those other occupations, lawyers have an opportunity to do more than stoically facilitate the client's suffering. We have, at every turn, the ability and the obligation to be advocates, confidants and counselors at law. Our clients understand this, and reward us with their esteem.

Recently, after a week during which I devoted much of my time to the work of the state bar and less to client work than I would have liked, I reached Friday evening tired and a little discouraged. But the office closed and I found myself walking into a small neighborhood restaurant with my sons and my husband. We didn't have reservations but at that relatively early hour several tables were available. As the waitress gathered menus and place-mats the owner/chef looked out from the kitchen. I had represented her years before in a small matter. When she saw us she beamed and came out of the kitchen wiping her hands on her apron. She embraced me and spoke to the boys, holding them by the cheeks while she did. The boys grinned and looked at their shoes. They knew "the restaurant lady" thought Mommy was the best.

When he was interviewed for the bar's Professionalism Course video, Judge Robert Merhige observed, "There are no small cases." I had done nothing out of the ordinary for my client at the restaurant, but the work I had done was important to her, and she showed it.

So who's the best? You are. Your clients know it. When you get a thank you card or a gift, cherish it. When a client refers someone else to you, remember it. Regardless of what the polls say about the profession or what the magazines write about your colleagues, you are the best in the eyes of your clients. And that's what counts. ☺