

# Getting Personal: Finding Higher Ground in Practicing Law

*Happiness is only a by-product of successful living.*

Dr. Austen Fox Riggs



**O'Kelly E. McWilliams, III, 2001–2002 Young Lawyers Conference President**

Lawyers rank at the top, or near the top, of all occupations suffering from depression and chemical abuse. Yet most students come to law school with enthusiasm and high expectations and hopes for a bright future. What goes wrong? Some would suggest the practice has changed: Civility is missing, professionalism has gone by the wayside, and there are more lawyers chasing fewer dollars. I don't buy that explanation. The "golden days" of the past frankly weren't that golden. Law firms were built to make money, and lawyers were always expected to earn money for firms.

Then what is the problem with lawyers? Why are they so unhappy as a profession? The complaint among many lawyers is that they feel oppressed by what they do. However, there are many lawyers who have managed to rise above the feeling of oppression and find a higher ground in practicing law. I'm convinced that they learned the following simple lessons for the restoration of their happiness (and sanity).

**First, take the time to remember what you stand for and what you want.** Why did you choose the law, and what is it that you intended to achieve as a consequence? What kind of an impact are you presently having? What kind of an impact do you want to have? Our lives are shaped most not by what we take with us, but by what we leave behind. When all is said and done, how would you want to be remembered? What will you have left behind?

**Aim high.** Dream big. In the best of all worlds, drawing upon the promise of our profession and the unique contributions that only you can make, what would you be doing? Be governed by your admirations rather than your disgusts. Endeavor to take the larger, higher view. For guidance, think back to when you were a child and believed that you were born for something special. All those years ago, you were right. Recapture that promise. Remember who you are.

**Do all with dignity and love.** No matter where you have started, no matter what you are doing now, do it with dignity and love. Rather than focus on what is missing from your life, take stock of all that you do have. The surest way to ensure prosperity is to dwell with gratitude on the good in your life. Know that

regardless of how humble or modest your circumstances are at this time, there are countless people out there who wish that they could be in your shoes but will never get the chance.

**Free yourself from fear of rejection.** Take risks. In the process, decide that you are not going to allow anyone else's limiting thoughts or judgments to shape your life. Do not employ the naysayers, the negative beliefs or the self-doubts. No one can make you feel inferior without your consent. Give no one else permission to set your limits or chart your path. You deserve to be happy. If you are miserable where you are, move on. Follow your heart, trust your intuition and explore the possibilities. In the process, embrace the rejections that inevitably will come your way. If no one is rejecting you, you are living too small. And keep in mind that the one thousand no's will melt away in the face of that one yes.

**Remember that it is all about service.** To know that someone has breathed easier because you have lived—let that be the standard and the goal. As lawyers, we are not automatons, technicians or hired guns. To separate virtue from our professional pursuits puts us in danger of losing our very souls. Service, compassion and commitment to the community should count for more than hours billed or hourly rate when we gauge each other's measure. Reject the appearance of limitation and those messages of excuse, such as "I don't have enough money or enough time or enough energy," or "Hours devoted to pro bono work won't count." Shift your mind set, instead of asking, "What's in it for me?" Ask, "How can I help?" When you combine your abilities with service to humanity, the rewards will come. It will make you a better lawyer and a better human being.\*

I hope these suggestions help you reach that higher ground and find happiness in our profession. I must admit, serving as president of the Young Lawyers Conference this year has definitely assisted me in my quest to reach a higher ground.

\* These suggestions were adapted from and can be explored in more detail in *Throw Your Fears Out the Window: A Book on Wisdom, Inspiration and Guidance for Law Students and Lawyers* (Donnelly & Sons, 1997) written by Paula A. Franzese, a Professor of Law at Seton Hall Law School.