

# — VSB Attorney Profile —

## Noel D. Sengel



This is the first in a *Virginia Lawyer* magazine series of profiles of State Bar attorneys. Noel Davidson Sengel is senior assistant bar counsel and manages the bar's Alexandria office. Noel grew up on a farm in Buckingham, Virginia. She attended Westhampton College, the University of Richmond and was graduated with a B.A. in history and classics. She attended the University of Virginia School of Law. Prior to joining the VSB in 1993, she was an associate member and principal of three law firms in Alexandria. She also served as assistant commonwealth's attorney for the City of Alexandria. Her husband, daughter and son-in-law are also lawyers.

**VZ: What were your earliest impressions of lawyers and how have they changed?**

**NS:** I was a high school student and college student in the 1960s and a law student in the 1970s. During my youth, I saw the amazing things lawyers could do to make a society more just. I saw lawyers changing the way minorities and women were treated in education and the workplace. Lawyers were heroes to young people in those days, and there was a corresponding increase in law school enrollment.

Even today, I feel many lawyers are heroes, but I think we do a bad job of explaining to the community how important lawyers are in maintaining a civil society and the values most Americans hold dear. We allow others to control the debate about who lawyers are and what they do—a big mistake on our part.

**VZ: What is it like to have family in the profession?**

**NS:** We talk about the law and being lawyers all the time, from strategizing

about trial tactics to complaining about the stress. Being lawyers is a factor in the way we talk with each other about other aspects of our lives. All of us have a common approach to reporting facts and solving problems and none of us hesitates to argue forcefully for his or her position.

**VZ: Having been an associate, member and principal in three law firms how does your experience relate to your work at the bar?**

**NS:** It gives me tremendous insight into what really happens in the day-to-day practice of law, how members of a firm interact with each other and their clients and the kinds of pressures—financial, professional and personal—that affect a lawyer's performance.

**VZ: Do you ever feel sorry for the respondents in bar proceedings?**

**NS:** I frequently feel sorry for the respondents in bar proceedings. They are often people who have lost control of their lives—professionally and personally. I feel even more sorry for the respondent's clients. At the board level, cases often involve lawyers who should not be practicing law for any number of reasons, and clients who have suffered greatly because of their lawyers' dishonesty, incompetence and/or personal problems.

**VZ: Who are lawyers? Do they have common personality types? What good do they do? Why do they do wrong?**

**NS:** Most of my best friends, as well as family members, are lawyers and they are some of the brightest, funniest, most interesting people I know. Good lawyers are able to see both the forest and the trees. Good lawyers are disciplined, can handle stress well and keep

more than one ball in the air at a time. Bad lawyers lack discipline and do not care enough about people and solving their problems.

**VZ: Why does the bar matter to you, and why should other lawyers care about it? Why should the public care about it?**

**NS:** The bar matters to me, personally, because I care about the reputation of lawyers in the community. And it should matter to all attorneys in the commonwealth. Our disciplinary system uses volunteer members to determine whether or not a lawyer has violated the *Virginia Code of Professional Responsibility* and to impose sanctions when necessary. A panel of lawyers from the respondent's community at the committee level, and from around the state at the board level, makes the determination as to whether a respondent's behavior meets the minimum ethical standards.

It is one of the few systems today where an individual is truly judged by a jury of his or her peers. We should count ourselves lucky that we have such a system to discipline ourselves. The community should count itself lucky that Virginia lawyers hold themselves to such a high ethical standard—and do so at no cost to the taxpayers, with full disclosure of our public determinations to the community on an easily accessible Web site.