

A Sense of Pride

by Jeannie P. Dahnk, 2003–2004 VSB President



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This president's page is my last. I have enjoyed and felt honored by the opportunity to appear, in print, on these pages, and I will miss this soapbox along with so much else about the job of state bar president. Meanwhile, the same people who asked me a year ago how in the world I was going to do the job are now asking me if I am glad the ride is over. So, while I was driving back from Accomack County, my last long trip to see a local bar group, I thought about why I will miss this job, and why I am so grateful to have held it.

I have always been proud to be a lawyer and even more proud to be a Virginia lawyer. There have been times when I did not love the practice of law: moments when I hated my job and despaired in my choice of careers. In the last ten years, however, I have developed an appreciation for my profession, a sense of purpose and meaning in what we do as lawyers and a sense of pride in and hope for the profession. The difference: service to the Virginia State Bar. In the last decade, I have gained far more than I have given in this relationship.

In June 1987, the first time I attended the Bar's Annual Meeting at the Cavalier Hotel in Virginia Beach, I watched a group of lawyers receiving their fifty-year awards. I was 27, a year into practice and unable to imagine being a lawyer for a half century. Those lawyers had begun their practice in 1937, before the Second World War, before integration, before the Internet and before I was born. I wondered if they had been proud to be members of the Bar for all those years, or if the practice of law had become a burden.

A few years later I was able to fill the seat of my late law partner, Jim Ashby, on Bar Council. I had a steep learning curve on virtually all issues relating to the governance of the Bar. I was promptly put on the Midyear Legal Seminar Committee, which I referred to in private as the "frivolities committee." I found myself alone and intimidated at the first few meetings—but that soon changed.

I began to know the Bar staff. Bet Keller was my first ally. Her style and dexterity in handling logistics and egos with equal aplomb is a thing of beauty. She expertly manages the annual meeting, the midyear legal seminar and the professionalism program for law students. Barbara Williams's confidence and dignity as our chief ethics prosecutor inspires awe and loyalty. She has eliminated the vast majority of backlog in the disciplinary system, while implementing the new Rules of Professional Conduct. Terry Patrick manages to keep the constant stream of council and com-

mittee members moving in the right direction without their realizing she is guiding them. Maureen Stengel introduced me to the professionalism course—her pride and joy. Maureen is substantially responsible for the great success of that program. Susan Busch watches over the budget with a keen eye and masterful expertise and Mary Yancey Spencer works flawlessly as our liaison to the legislature and keeps the Bar publications at Pulitzer level.

Tom Edmonds, our longstanding executive director, is one of the most talented and accomplished people I have ever met. He is immersed, saturated and suffused with all things important for Virginia lawyers. His encyclopedic knowledge of the history of the Bar and the issues faced by it in the past is matched by his level of engagement on all matters of concern to Virginia lawyers. He also knows every judge, every legislator and seemingly every attorney in the Commonwealth.

And there are many more Bar staff who I have grown to know and admire: Valerie Breeden, Jim McCauley, Leslie Haley, Rod Coggin, Dolly Shaffner and Maureen Petrini. I cannot name them all, but I reflect on the Bar staff here because they all share a commitment to the profession—and that commitment I found to be highly contagious.

And then, of course, there were (and are) the other lawyers and judges: Joe Condo, Ed Lowry, Jim Korman, Arlene Starace, Jon Huddleston, David Bobzien, Ben DiMuro, the Honorable Chief Justice Leroy R. Hassell Sr. and the Honorable William H. Ledbetter Jr. All of these lawyers and judges and many others, as well, encouraged me at different times and in different ways.

After I was sworn in as president a year ago, I had the opportunity to hand out the fifty-year awards. I was just as awed as I had been at my first annual meeting, but there was a difference. I knew how proud those recipients were—and why they should be so proud. Ours is a wonderful bar filled with and supported by people who believe that what lawyers do matters, and doing what we do well matters most of all.

I do not know if I will get a fifty-year award myself. I feel almost greedy wishing for one. But I do know that I have enjoyed my year as president, and will treasure all of my years as a Virginia lawyer. 🍷