

# Young Lawyers, the Firm, and the Bar



**Tracy A. Giles, 2000–2001 Young Lawyers Conference President**

I recently listened to the senior partner of a medium-sized firm bemoan the loss of civility in the practice of law. In almost the next breath, he wondered how he could possibly get enough work out of his new associates to recoup their high salaries. He did not seem to think that the two observations were related. I believe that they are.

Economics and technology are fundamentally changing the practice of law for young lawyers. While these forces have always been with us, surveys, focus groups, anecdotal accounts, and our own experiences prove that these pressures are intensifying. As a young child I visited Disney World and toured the “World of Tomorrow” pavilion. Arrayed inside were all the wonderful appliances and gadgets that would make our lives easier and happier. Years later I read a study that compared the average time spent on household chores at the turn of the century with average time spent in the mid-1980s. You guessed it: more time was spent on chores at the end of the century than at the beginning. Young lawyers face much the same dynamic. The relentless economics of the billable hour and high overhead ensure that technology will be used to its fullest extent. Technology has not given us more time to smell the roses. We cannot isolate our profession from the fast-moving world—nor should we try. Technology allows a degree of responsiveness and productivity never before experienced. But cell phones, laptops, pagers, and Palm Pilots have the potential to tether a young lawyer like a goat to the firm, the partner and the client. There is no more getting away from work for private time alone or with family, much less for community service or bar work.

Over and over again surveys and focus groups find that the happiest young lawyers are those who feel that their lives are balanced; that they are not isolated, but rather practice in a community of lawyers; that they do real work, and have real mentors. Unfortunately the surveys and focus groups reveal that there are many disillusioned young lawyers. Law firms and the

organized bar must reverse this trend if my generation is to experience the same collegiality, camaraderie, and spirit of community service enjoyed by previous generations of Virginia lawyers. There must be a partnership between the generations. The senior members of our profession must lead by the examples and policies they set. The most direct influence on the culture a young lawyer experiences is the firm in which he or she practices. What kind of job does the firm do mentoring? Many clients are aggressive and unwilling to pay for an extra lawyer to go to court or sit in on a deposition. If so, is that important but non-billable mentoring taking place? Does the firm encourage community involvement, bar work, family life? Does the firm encourage these activities only as long as they have no detrimental effect on the bottom line? Is the message “do these things, but you had better maintain maximum billable hours”? If so, we are not building the kind of professional community we will be happy with 15 years from now.

What is the role of the organized bar and specifically the Virginia State Bar Young Lawyers Conference in this economic- and technology-driven environment? For many years, the YLC has been seen as the service arm of the bar, and rightly so. Our projects have focused on our mission to serve the public interest. Because of our Emergency Legal Services Program, disaster victims around the state have been able to start rebuilding their homes and lives. Because we have helped establish child witness waiting rooms, there are children who no longer have to stare into the faces of their alleged abusers while waiting to testify. Because of our Domestic Violence Safety Project, there are women going to bed tonight in Virginia without first being beaten. These and other projects are some of the most important things we could possibly be doing. We are proud of our tradition of public service, and will continue with this mission. However, the bedrock principle which allows this work to be done is a sense of ourselves within a community of lawyers with a professional calling to serve our clients and the public.

Economic and technological pressures at their worst are eating away at this bedrock. I believe we must focus new effort on the needs of our members. Bar associations are the logical place where traditional values of our profession should be nurtured. Efforts have been made. The Mandatory Professionalism Course and the First Day in Practice seminar are having a positive effect. But these efforts take place during a new lawyer's first six months of practice. What happens after that? I believe the Young Lawyers Conference—working with the senior bar, the bench, other bar associations and law firms—needs to do more if we are to maintain the collegiality and high standards that have made the practice of law in Virginia the envy of many around the country.

The YLC is planning a Professional Development Conference next March. This Conference will include both CLE and non-CLE programming, specifically tailored to lawyers in their first decade of practice. The goal will be for every attendee to take away something that will improve his or her life, and practice. We hope many will join us, and we welcome your input. 🙏

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