

Together, We Can Make a Difference



Colin "Cal" J. S. Thomas, Jr., 2002–2003 Senior Lawyers Conference Chair

When I came to the bar in Staunton, Virginia, in February, 1962, I very soon learned who the senior lawyers were—at least from a trial lawyer's standpoint. In my area of practice they were Sloan Kuykendall, of Winchester, Bill Wharton, of Harrisonburg, Wayt Timberlake, of Staunton, Bill Rosenberger, of Lynchburg and John Walker, of Roanoke. I am sure there were others; however, these stood out in my mind. What made them senior lawyers? It was a combination of their work ethic, their integrity and their unswerving belief that being a lawyer was honorable. In court, they were sometimes on the same side and sometimes not. They won and lost with grace. They had good priorities. Family always came first. The respect of the judiciary and other lawyers, as well as their clients, were important. There was never consideration of "fudging" the facts. They won or lost honestly.

Senior lawyers are those of us who are 55 years of age or older. There are approximately 8,000 of us. We lead large and small law firms. We include former presidents and present leaders of virtually every organized legal group. Many of us are in our most productive years. A majority of Virginia judges are in our generation. We began our second year as a conference of the Virginia State Bar with a challenge.

Can we as a conference lead our members and our profession in the right direction? Can we, by example and by teaching and mentoring, inculcate the proper values in others—including the newest members of our profession?

If we want to, we can. Many of us lead by example every day. Some of us do not. The lure of money and the competitive desire to win—sometimes at any cost—are strong and constant temptations.

Ethics and self-policing are primary missions of the Virginia State Bar. Ethics is more than black letter rules of conduct contained in

our professional guidelines. The rules do not cover every situation, but they establish a minimum standard. The bar is set low. Judicial determination of alleged constitutional rights has required change and relaxation from the more stringent requirements that present senior lawyers were required to adhere to when they were younger. Nothing requires that lawyers cannot aspire to and meet higher standards.

I urge that we do what we can to come together as a group and to accept the responsibility of being seniors. I urge that we lead both by example and by virtue of having authority to require true professionalism. As senior lawyers, we are the leaders in our firms. As such, we can stress professionalism. In many instances we may virtually require conduct that will win respect for individuals, for firms and for our profession.

Even if we care and come together, we will not be an overnight sensation. It will take time to succeed. We will need to learn how to work together as a group. We will need the help of many. We will seek help from those who may have time to spare and those who may have none. We may ask for help from lawyers who are in their busiest and most productive time. We will need help from the judiciary. If you are asked for help, please don't turn us down. Better yet, don't wait to be asked—volunteer.

The Senior Lawyers Conference can help uphold the honor of the profession of law—apply the knowledge and experience of the profession to the public good, and encourage cordial discourse and interaction among the members of the Virginia State Bar. We are a lot more than seniors helping seniors.

I look forward to our future. Together, we can make a difference!