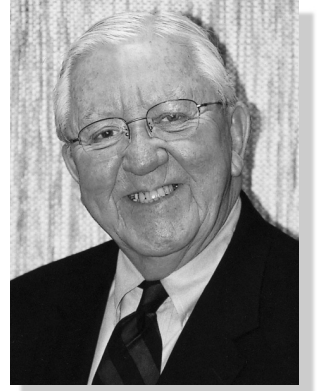


General Practice and The Senior Lawyers Conference

William B. Smith, 2004–2005 Senior Lawyers Conference Chair



Maybe this senior lawyer's long-term memory just kicked in, but it doesn't seem that long ago (almost fifty years) that I hung out my shingle in my hometown of Lynchburg, Virginia to embark on the general practice of law. Luckily, I found a senior lawyer who agreed to let me share rent and telephone expenses with him "on the tab," with the understanding that as soon as I started making some money I would start paying him.

The bread-and-butter work consisted of court-appointed criminal defense, individual bankruptcy and family law (this was simply called "divorces" then).

Divorces were mostly hand-me-down cases from other lawyers (usually seniors) who either didn't handle divorce cases at all or didn't want to handle the particular case (usually with good reason), or the client didn't have any, or not enough, money. Gradually my general practice grew, largely from referrals from senior lawyers.

I was fortunate enough to have the benefit of a kind, interested and generous senior lawyer share not only his office but his knowledge and experience with me for the first several years of my practice. In addition, there was no end to the cooperation and guidance from other senior lawyers in the area.

After fourteen years of practice in Lynchburg as a solo practitioner sharing offices with other attorneys, I moved to Virginia Beach and, in several different practice settings, have largely continued in general practice.

This personal history brings me to the point of this article. Of the more than ten thousand senior lawyer members of the Seniors Lawyers Conference (fifty-five or more years of age and in good standing with the Virginia State Bar), there must be many general practitioners throughout the commonwealth and in every imaginable office arrangement. Although there are no statistics, we can safely assume that most SLC general practitioners between fifty-five and sixty-five are full-time lawyers and that many from sixty-five to seventy-five and even older are still actively practicing,

although they may have in many instances made some adjustments in the pace of their practice.

My own experience tells me that, whether in a small community or a large city, lawyers are willing to help each other. The changes in the last fifty years or so, such as the dramatic increase in overhead, competition and the cost of living, have made even more critical how a lawyer uses his time. These developments may have made younger general practitioners who need some guidance in new and unfamiliar legal situations hesitant to call on a senior lawyer for helpful information and assistance.

I believe there are many Senior Lawyers Conference members who would be more than willing to respond to requests for help from younger general practitioners.

In a related development, a joint project of the Supreme Court of Virginia and the VSB will study how the bar can assist small firm and solo practitioners, particularly in rural areas. SLC board member George W. Shanks of Luray is a member of the study committee, which will meet at the VSB Bar Leaders Institute in Abington on March 18, 2005.

In the meantime, the SLC and the study committee would welcome any ideas or comments from the General Practice Section, other sections and the Young Lawyers Conference. [↩](#)