

Supreme Court Initiatives Led Year of Successful 'Firsts'



by Phillip V. Anderson, 2005–2006 VSB President

The beginning of a new year is time for all of us to reflect on the successes and disappointments of the past and to focus on our hopes for the future. So it is with the Virginia State Bar. The year 2005 brought many successful firsts. The bar along with the Supreme Court of Virginia offered the first Indigent Defense Training Initiative, an advanced skills training program for court-appointed counsel and public defenders, in two locations in the state at no charge to attendees. The daylong program showcased leading criminal defense experts and received overwhelmingly positive reviews from those in attendance.

The first Solo and Small-Firm Practitioner Forum was offered twice in 2005, to provide resources and opportunities for lawyers to learn more about claims avoidance and to interface with Supreme Court justices and bar officials on various ideas in a town hall meeting format.

There were disappointments, as well. We who hoped for increased funding for court-appointed counsel and public defenders representing Virginia's indigent population in criminal cases were greatly disappointed when increases failed to find their way into the Governor's proposed budget. Barring intervention by the General Assembly, Virginia will continue to maintain its last-place position among the fifty states in terms of the funding provided for defense of Virginia's poor.

It also brought news that for me was very disappointing. In the late days of December, Barbara Ann Williams called to tell me that after eight years as Virginia State Bar counsel she had accepted an opportunity to return to private practice. It truly was an opportunity too good to pass up. Although excited for Barbara, I was disappointed because she has been a great friend and ally to me and all who have worked with her.

She offered great leadership to the bar. She handled complicated and demanding cases as lead counsel, and she managed and

restructured the system to improve efficiency in complaint processing. She developed a highly motivated professional staff.

Despite an 18 percent growth in the bar's membership and 60 percent increase in bar complaints during her tenure, Barbara lessened the time it took to process and resolve disciplinary complaints. The backlog in old cases was reduced to an all-time low. Supervising a staff of forty, including assistant bar counsel, investigators, ethics counsel, intake counsel and staff, Barbara led by example. She worked diligently and conscientiously to improve the system and set the very highest standard for herself and her department. An impassioned believer in our self-regulatory system, Barbara will be missed by her colleagues and by the hundreds of volunteers who looked to her for leadership. I will miss her wise counsel and insight. We wish her the very best.

We look forward to 2006 with promise. The disciplinary system is now in the very capable hands of Deputy Bar Counsel Harry M. Hirsch. Harry has been with the bar for twenty two years and has worked closely with Barbara over the years in developing many of the structural changes to improve the efficiency of our disciplinary system. He will manage the disciplinary department while VSB President-elect Karen A. Gould leads a bar counsel search committee.

We are unveiling an unprecedented service—a Web-based legal research service available to Virginia lawyers as a membership benefit, with no additional fee. (See story on page 6.) The project was first discussed in 2004, during David P. Bobzien's year as president.

So we look forward to 2006 with optimism, as we continue to serve Virginia's lawyers and the public by regulating and elevating our profession. ☪