

The Mark of the Master

by George W. Shanks, 2006–2007 Conference of Local Bar Associations Chair



As I write this column, the Fredericksburg session of the Bar Leaders Institute and the fifth incarnation of the Solo & Small-Firm Practitioner Forum is a “wrap,” and preparation for the Roanoke redux is in high gear. I have written before about these high-energy, high-interest programs. I am enthusiastic about them. I am proud of the Conference of Local Bar Associations and its accomplishments in sponsoring the programs. And I am honored that Chief Justice Leroy R. Hassell Sr. and Justice Cynthia D. Kinser have asked the CLBA to be the permanent home for the Solo and Small-Firm Practitioner initiative.

The Bar Leaders Institute has for almost two decades convened annually to address the specific challenges of local bar leaders, to energize their administrations and programs, and to provide collegiality and connection. Being a bar leader occasionally engenders a fox-hole mentality and reminds us that we all share that foxhole from time to time. More often, the experience, like parenthood, is over before it can be savored and truly appreciated for the rare gift it is.

In 2004, the Chief Justice appointed a Solo and Small-Firm Commission to address the disconnect he perceived between the majority of practicing attorneys in Virginia and the organized bar. He believed that lawyers received more regulation and less support. He tasked Justice Kinser to chair the effort and, over eighteen months under her prescient guidance, the Solo and Small-Firm Practitioner Forum was born. It incorporated programs on ethics, office practice and management, and planning for retirement, disability or death.

It also featured a Town Hall Meeting hosted by the Chief Justice. From the forum's first presentation in Abingdon in April 2005 it was an unqualified success. It provided continuing legal education, including ethics credits; an inspiring luncheon speaker; excellent food; an opportunity to address the Chief Justice about court and state bar matters; and a reception sponsored by a local bar—and all for free to the attendees. This event is unparalleled in the history of bar presentations.

The merger of the BLI with the Solo & Small-Firm Practitioner Forum was as natural as it was inspired. Bar leaders are bar members first. Solos and small firms make up two-thirds of practitioners in the commonwealth—truly a marriage made in heaven.

All of this, of course, is prologue to the real story: To be a presenter at one of these events is a professional ego trip, to be sure. But it would be folly to believe that these road shows are the smashing success they are solely because of the quality of their content or the character of their faculty. They succeed because of hard work, pure and simple. That work is performed primarily by two dedicated VSB employees: Barbara O. Allen and Paulette J. Davidson. Let me share with you their biographies, for these women are tireless in their efforts on behalf of the bar.

Barbara's professional life has led her down fascinating and memorable roads. As a journalism student at Virginia Commonwealth University, she says, she was in the right place at the right time in 1980 when she joined the staff of the clerk of the Virginia House

of Delegates. With a flair for politics and acumen to match, she went on to the Office of the Attorney General where she was involved in public relations and the management of the Attorney General's calendar. She then moved to the Governor's Office, where she was special assistant to the Governor and liaison to cabinet offices and special projects. For the past thirteen years, she has been a miracle worker at the Virginia State Bar.

Paulette joined the VSB in 1987; her career also has included work with the State Corporation Commission and in private industry. An excellent organizer, she wears many hats for the bar. Like Barbara, she carries out her tasks with style and in a cheerful way that belies their difficulty.

With the fusion of the BLI and the Solo & Small-Firm Practitioner Forum, the VSB has assigned another employee, Dolly C. Shaffner, to lend a hand. She has done her job with easy grace. Her smile is a bonus that perpetuates the myth that these programs put on themselves.

And so, as attendees bestow comments and kudos on our Fredericksburg event and we eagerly await the Roanoke program on May 23, 2007, I extend to Barbara, Paulette and Dolly, on behalf of the Conference of Local Bar Associations and on behalf of the fifteen hundred attorneys who have attended these programs, my sincerest thanks for a spectacular job, done over and over—to perfection each time—in a way that makes it look easy. The mark of the master.