

Building Bridges and Planting Apple Trees

by Frank O. Brown Jr.

Many years ago, the late E. Griffith Dodson Jr. introduced me to a favorite poem, “The Bridge Builder” by Will Allen Dromgoole¹. It conceptualizes one of the essential roles of senior lawyers in the legal profession and of citizens in our country.

The Bridge Builder

An old man, going a lone highway,
Came, at the evening, cold and gray,
To a chasm, vast, and deep, and wide,
Through which was flowing a sullen tide.

The old man crossed in the twilight dim;
The sullen stream had no fear for him;
But he turned, when safe on the other side,
And built a bridge to span the tide.

“Old man,” said a fellow pilgrim, near,
“You are wasting strength with building here;
Your journey will end with the ending day;
You never again will pass this way;
You’ve crossed the chasm, deep and wide —
Why build you this bridge at the
evening tide?”

The builder lifted his old gray head:
“Good friend, in the path I have come,” he said,
“There followeth after me today,
A youth, whose feet must pass this way.

This chasm, that has been naught to me,
To that fair-haired youth may a pitfall be.
He, too, must cross in the twilight dim;
Good friend, I am building this bridge for him.”

“Grif” Dodson knew whereof he spoke. By the time of his death at age 87, he had lived a long and productive life. He served his country in the U.S. Navy during World War II as a gunnery officer, executive officer, and commanding officer of a submarine chaser in the Pacific. He was a founder and the first president of the Roanoke Jaycees; represented Roanoke in the Virginia House of Delegates; led the Virginia State Bar as its president in 1961–62; and served as a member of the vestry and as senior warden of his church under three rectors. With Molly, his wife of sixty years, he raised his loving family of three children (who had blessed them with seven grandchildren). He was chosen as Roanoke Father of the Year in religious activities. He served on the board of governors of the then Senior Lawyers Section of the VSB and as its chair in 1996–97, and he mentored many young lawyers (including a judge or two). He had a successful career as a practicing lawyer. He sailed many a river and planted many a garden (even giving each of his young children their own plots in the garden, so that they could learn and enjoy gardening and the optimism that comes with it). And helped build many bridges that those of us in practice today cross on a regular basis. He was a true citizen lawyer.

In an editorial in the May 19, 2001, *Roanoke Times*, Judge Jack B. Coulter wrote, “Another Giant of the law and a citizen extraordinaire has passed on the torch for those of us who remain behind. By word and deed, by creed and act, E. Griffith Dodson Jr. set examples of meaningful leadership, dedication to aggressive service and unbounded faith that ultimate good would prevail, that had no equal. His life was truly one of principle and integrity to the sacrifice of all else.”

Grif Dodson died on May 8, 2001. He would have been pleased that the Senior Lawyers Conference of the Virginia State Bar was established on June 14, 2001, through the diligent efforts of Overton P. Pollard, William B. Smith, myself, and others, with the support and encour-

agement of then VSB President Michael A. Glasser — a true friend of seniors. The conference comprises all members of the VSB who are fifty-five years of age or older and who are in good standing; membership is automatic, and there are no additional dues. There are more than 13,500 members in the conference. Among its purposes are “to uphold the honor of the profession of law, to apply the knowledge and experience of the profession to the promotion of the public good, and to encourage cordial discourse and interaction among the members of the Virginia State Bar (VSB).”

The conference has a twenty-four member board of governors from judicial circuits throughout the commonwealth. Since its inception in 2001, the conference has nearly doubled in size, making it the largest volunteer component of the VSB. This means that many lawyers for whom bridges were being built are now bridge builders.

The *Senior Citizens Handbook* is the most popular publication of the VSB. Topics include Social Security, Supplemental Security Income, pensions, veterans’ benefits, Railroad Retirement Act benefits, food stamps, federal tax relief, real estate tax reductions for the elderly, Medicaid, Medicare, medigap, long-term care insurance, nursing homes, and assisted living facilities, among many other subjects. The book also contains agency contact information. The handbook is distributed at public information gatherings and can be placed by local bar associations or lawyers in libraries, churches, assisted living facilities, or other appropriate locations. A newly revised edition of this publication is available through the VSB publications office at (804) 775-0548, and it is published online at VSB.org.

Senior Law Day Programs are based on a format developed by past conference chair William T. “Bill” Wilson, who presented the first program with the Alleghany-Bath-Highland Bar Association in Covington. Since then, the programs have been presented across the state. As Wilson said, “In my judgment, the programs are ‘win-win-win.’ The senior citizens win because they are receiving information about legal issues affecting their lives. ... If you have been present or have participated in one of these programs, you know how attentively and appreciatively the senior citizens receive the program and how interested they are in the subject matter. The program is also a win for the lawyers and their bar associations, because it is impossible to be a part of one of these programs and not see the enormous good that is being accomplished. To be able to give information to

senior citizens and know that they are receiving information vital to their well-being is a rewarding and professionally satisfying thing to do. The program is also a win because it raises the image of the lawyers, the legal profession, and the bar associations in the eyes of the public.” A blueprint for this program can be obtained by calling Patricia A. Sliger, VSB liaison to the Senior Lawyers Conference, at (804) 775-0576.

“Protecting Your and Your Clients’ Interests in the Event of Your Disability, Death, or Other Disaster” is a conference program to educate and to encourage all lawyers in Virginia to plan. It can be presented as a mandatory continuing legal education pre-approved program with full ethics credit. It is presented at no charge to the Virginia State Bar or to local or specialty bar associations.

The program has been presented at least once in Abingdon, Alexandria, Arlington, Boydton, Covington, Charlottesville, Danville, Fairfax, Fredericksburg, Gloucester, Harrisonburg, Henrico, Irvington, Keysville, Leesburg, Lynchburg, Mclean, Richmond, Roanoke, Salem, Virginia Beach, Williamsburg, Winchester, and more than once at some locations. To schedule this program for your local or specialty bar association, call Ms. Sliger.

Bridging the gap between young lawyers and senior lawyers is an effort led by past SLC chair Jack W. “JB” Burtch Jr., a recognized authority on mentoring, whose passion is intergenerational communication. JB has researched and written articles to benefit attorneys in *Virginia Lawyer* and in *Senior Lawyer News (SLN)*, the Senior Lawyers Conference newsletter. These articles are valuable references and are downloadable at <http://www.vsb.org/slc>.

Promoting and maintaining civility and professionalism are other conference goals. Many senior lawyers are faculty of the VSB’s Harry L. Carrico Professionalism Course and have written on professionalism and civility in the practice of law in bar publications. On a daily basis, we look to all lawyers, and especially senior lawyers, to set an example for the profession in matters of civility and professionalism.

Remembrances of deceased, distinguished senior lawyers are published periodically in the *Virginia Lawyer* and the *Senior Lawyer News*. They remind us of the qualities and conduct of these women and men who were inspirational leaders and bridge builders. We have remembered and learned from the lives of, among others, Sloan Kuykendall, Armistead L. Boothe, Charles L. Kaufman, Alan J. Hofheimer, William

Rosenberger Jr., Francis V. Lowden Jr., Fielding L. Williams Sr., William F. Parkerson Jr., William S. Moffett Jr., James E. “Jimmy” Edmunds, Douglas W. Conner, C. Hardaway Marks, James Clopton Knibb, A. Christian Compton, Frank W. Rogers Jr., Roby Greene Janney, Walter T. McCarthy, Oliver W. Hill Sr., Carolyn O’Neal Marsh, Jacob L. Morewitz, Ken McFarlane Smith, and Robert R. Mehrige Jr. As you reflect on these and other exemplary members of the profession, please share with other members of the profession your insights about them and the lessons learned from them, and, above all, please demonstrate by your own example. If you wish to write a remembrance to be shared with the bar, please e-mail me, at lawinorder@aol.com.

Pro bono activities are conducted by senior and other lawyers in different ways. Some provide pro bono services to clients as part of their everyday law practices, without any reporting of those services and without any legal aid organization being involved. Other lawyers, such as John M. Oakey Jr., provide their pro bono services under the auspices of a legal aid organization; John Oakey also accepts court-appointed cases. He received the Virginia State Bar 2007 Lewis F. Powell Jr. Pro Bono Award in recognition of his longstanding service in providing pro bono legal representation. He is a shining example of a senior lawyer’s pro bono spirit. George H. Hettrick of Hunton & Williams is responsible for his firm’s pro bono programs in Richmond, Charlottesville, and thirteen other locations in the U.S.; Hunton & Williams has increased its pro bono services by 40 percent since April 1, 2008.

As you reflect on these and other exemplary members of the profession, please share with other members of the profession your insights about them ...

The SLC encourages senior lawyers’ work in providing pro bono services. Renae Reed Patrick and Maureen K. Petrini wrote “Emerging Service Opportunities for Seasoned Lawyers,” (SLN, Spring 2008), the full text of which may be found at http://www.vsb.org/site/pro_bono/slc-news-sp08. The article identifies many ways to volunteer pro bono services.

I mentioned above that Grif Dodson loved gardening and instilled the optimism of that in his children. He may not have actually planted an apple tree in his garden (preferring instead tomatoes and jonquils), but he had the spirit of an apple-tree planter, as exemplified in William Cullen Bryant’s poem, “The Planting of the Apple-Tree,” which was written by Bryant when he was aged 55.

Bryant read the law and was admitted to practice in 1816. In this poem, Bryant wrote about the hopeful, prospective, and optimistic act of planting an apple tree, the tangible fruits of which the planter may or may not personally enjoy. But the planter will enjoy the intangible fruits of providing for the future.

After writing of the abundant life of the apple tree and the benefits it will provide, he concludes with a description of the decline of the apple tree in its old age and of young people of that distant time asking, “Who planted this old apple tree?”

Let us hope that we will be able to answer that question, and that we will have planted apple trees ourselves, over the years.

Bridges and apple trees provide unique benefits of different durations — the latter needing to be replaced more often than the former, but both requiring constant attention.

So it is with all of us — the senior lawyers, the young lawyers, and those in between — as with the bridge builder and the apple tree planter. The view must be toward the future, with the hopeful expectation that those who cross the bridge and those who enjoy the fruits of the apple tree will build new bridges and plant new apple trees for the benefit of the profession and the public. ■

Endnotes:

- 1 Will Allen Droomgoole is often erroneously referred to as “he” or “Mr. Droomgoole.” She was born in Tennessee in 1860 and read law with her father who was a practicing lawyer in that state. Because of the Tennessee laws then in effect, as a woman she was not allowed to practice law. She was, however, elected clerk of the Tennessee State Senate when she was twenty-five years of age. When the U.S. entered World War I, she volunteered, at age fifty-seven, for active duty in the Navy, and served as a warrant officer, stationed in Norfolk, from 1917 to 1918. She spent most of her professional career as a writer and editor for the *Nashville Banner*. She died in 1934.