

President's Message

by Jon D. Huddleston



Choices

Spring 1968

"Can you get your mom's car?" his friend asked. "Come on, can you get your mom's car? I've got a gun, let's go get some money. Get your mom's car."

"Are you crazy?" he replied.

"You've lost your mind."

"It'll be easy, let's go get some money."

In the pantheon of decisions typically confronting young men as they are crossing that threshold into adulthood, this scenario doesn't show up very often. At least, it didn't in my neighborhood.

Judge Gerald Bruce Lee recently told this story at the Colors of Justice program hosted at the U.S. District Court in Alexandria. Eighty high school kids witnessed a mock trial, deliberated as jurors, and heard from some of Virginia's finest jurists about the law, the profession, and themselves. It is an extraordinary program. But it was Judge Lee's story about choices — his choices — that so resonated with me.

August 26, 1972

I was twelve years old. It was Saturday morning. My father had this good idea that the grass needed cutting and that I was just the person for the job. I decided that this good idea could wait until I was through with whatever rerun I was watching. In short, I would get to it when I got to it. He went out to start the job himself, no doubt not wishing to expend the energy necessary to persuade his pre-teenage son as to the rectitude of his request.

Several minutes later, my brother came in, screaming to my mom that my dad had passed out working on the tractor, having witnessed a screw-

driver falling from Dad's unconscious hand. The ambulance was called and we waited.

I next saw my father a couple of days later, laid out in his favorite blue suit at the funeral home at what they call the visitation, struggling to hold back tears in an effort to be the man I thought my father would want me to be.

The heart attack that killed my father was a fairly inevitable event. He had degenerative heart disease stemming from rheumatic fever, his souvenir from his brief military career in service to our country. Much of my childhood was marked by extended hospitalizations and subsequent convalescence. I do not recall his attendance at a single sporting event or school activity. All of those responsibilities and so many more fell to my mother. It didn't mean he loved us less; it just meant that circumstances precluded him from participating in our lives as much as I am sure he had hoped.

Perhaps this is a curious juxtaposition of events, unrelated by time, stage of life, and neighborhood. However, each event inexorably helped shape our lives, our professional development, and our outlook on life.

Judge Lee's choice was far more palpable, more instantaneous. His refusal to bend to wishes of his friend meant the difference between jail (where his friend wound up) and college. I am sure Judge Lee would tell you there were other seminal events that helped chart the course of his career but I suspect none were more momentous.

My father's death, or rather his life, also uniquely shaped my choices

— for career, for family, for balance. I have long since understood that my failure to cut the grass did not kill my father. However, his absence uniquely permeated almost every important decision I would make as an adult.

I chose a career in law for a number of reasons. Inevitably, one of them was the influence of my cousin's husband, Jack Lotis, who was a fine lawyer and later a judge who was a great male role model for me. I chose a small firm that might allow me greater opportunity to not only practice law but to be a part of my community — to fulfill my notion of what being a "citizen lawyer" meant.

Last July, I appeared on the cover of *Virginia Lawyer* with nine children — two of whom are mine — whom I had coached in various sports, principally soccer and basketball. I felt that this would set the tone for beginning my year-long campaign — Virginia Is for Good Lawyers. My thesis was and is that no profession does more for its community than ours. Through "The Big Picture" program, we have showcased the good works of several Virginia lawyers and judges. I hope you have seen them on YouTube. What a thrill it was for me to meet good lawyers like Dave and Kami Lannetti and to learn of their great work with the Special Olympics in Norfolk, and Judge Angela Roberts and to discover the contributions she has made with the National Adoption Day Celebration in Richmond. I am proud of all our videos. I am prouder of the lawyers and judges we have profiled.

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What I have come to realize this past year is that all of this is about choices. The choice to help man a soup kitchen as Pete Buchbauer has done in Winchester for nearly ten years. The choice to referee high school football as Judge Rossie Alston did for several years while he practiced law. The choice to hammer nails for Habitat for Humanity, or to hand out fruit on a cold December afternoon for the Lion's Club, or to coach our youth, or to comfort the elderly. Choices. Good choices. Good lawyers.

The simple premise that "Virginia is for good lawyers" has carried us a long way. The Reflections page at VSB.org provides unique essays from many of Virginia's best lawyers and judges. We have used blogs, Twitter, and other social media to get our message out. But, the YouTube videos have been the cornerstone. These could not have been done without the creative energy and talent of Madonna Dersch at the Virginia State Bar. She has served as director, producer, editor, camera-

woman, and taskmaster. The credit for the breadth and quality of these programs begins with her. I would also like to thank Rod Coggin, the VSB's director of public affairs and publications, for his unwavering enthusiasm and support, even when it appeared that I was trying to turn their offices upside down. I have had the privilege of working with the wonderful professionals at the Virginia State Bar offices for years and this year was especially gratifying. To a person, each staff member has wished for nothing but success for my projects and me personally. Karen Gould leads an extraordinary team.

I will return to the full-time practice of law in June. The contributions of the president's firm are immeasurable. My colleagues at Sevila, Saunders, Huddleston & White have truly embraced this mission with me. Whether it meant covering or taking over my cases, or anything else, each member stepped up to allow me to fulfill the responsibilities of office. I could not ask to work with a better group.

The president's year is also very taxing on the president's family.

Whatever routine that may have existed previously disappears the day after the installation. My wife Cyndy and my sons Bobby and Jack weathered it all without complaint.

In June, my friend Irving Blank from Richmond will take over as the seventy-second president of the Virginia State Bar. Irv is an exceptional lawyer and an exceptional man. Virginia's good lawyers will be in excellent hands.

I began this column with an anecdote about Gerald Lee, my friend and very much a mentor to me. A few months before I began my term, I discussed some modest plans for the year with Judge Lee. No one would ever accuse Judge Lee of thinking small. His vision and creativity during that evening's discussion transformed my plans and served as much of the inspiration for what we tried to accomplish this year.

Soon, we return to the annual meeting to finish my term. This year, as it often does, the meeting will fall on Father's Day weekend. Happy Father's Day, Dad.