

Defending Liberty, Pursuing Justice

An Interview with ABA President Carolyn B. Lamm



AS THE VIRGINIA STATE BAR Young Lawyer's Conference representative to the American Bar Association's House of Delegates, I have witnessed lawyers zealously debating resolutions to defend liberty and pursue justice. I have learned from the experience of distinguished attorneys and have been inspired by their passion. So I decided to interview one of those lawyers for this column — ABA President Carolyn B. Lamm. Here are the highlights of the questions I asked and the answers she gave:

How did you become interested in law? When I was much younger, I saw the film *To Kill a Mockingbird* for the first time. I remember watching Atticus Finch standing alone in the courtroom. I wanted to stand beside him, to stand for what he stood for, to help him fight, and to win. It was not until some years later that I decided to study law. But somewhere in the background, Atticus Finch and the need to make a difference on issues of importance for the public and the profession inspired my decision. I decided to become a lawyer because I realized that the law is a noble profession. Lawyers fight against injustice and tyranny, protect the impoverished and outcast, and safeguard our most cherished liberties. It's no exaggeration to say that it's the work of lawyers willing to stand up for what's right that brings our own Constitution to life.

What in your opinion makes a lawyer successful? The most successful lawyers I know are the ones who remain true to themselves and to their principles. As Ambassador Madeleine Albright put

it, "Rely on your inner compass, for only you can set the standard by which your life will be measured." Lawyers with vision and principles are those who can make a profound difference for our society.

How has the practice of law changed during your career? For one thing, there are far more women in the profession. In 1973, I was one of twenty women who took the bar in Florida, out of a total of eight hundred. Today we are making progress, though we have far to go. Though women now graduate from law school at about the same rate as men, only 16 percent of equity partners in law firms are women. Discrimination remains in much more subtle, sophisticated, and even unconscious ways. It manifests itself in limited business opportunities, decisions regarding employment, promotion, and compensation, and views on performance. Another big change involves the technological advances and globalization that have transformed our world and the practice of law. The economic crisis demonstrates the interdependence of global markets and the emergence of truly global commerce.

How did you become involved in the ABA, and why? I have been involved in the ABA since I started practicing law. My ABA work began in the Young Lawyers Division, where many ABA leaders began. The ABA YLD is a place where you can learn about the ABA and the profession, enhance your professional skills and network to better serve your clients, earn valuable experience dealing with issues facing the pro-

fession and the public, perform community service, and develop lasting relationships with other lawyers. It was a great learning experience that I enjoyed tremendously on a professional and personal level. I became ABA YLD chair in 1983. Many of the friends I made then remain close friends today, and they were the foundation of a professional network that has since grown and helped me to become a better lawyer, better serve my clients and the public, and become a successful partner at my firm.

Why is bar service important? Years ago, many encouraged me to participate in the bar, and it has been instrumental and inspirational in my professional life. Indeed, some of my very best friends are friends that I've made through the bar. But most importantly, the bar and its work is where law reform often begins through discussion, resolution, and action. As Learned Hand observed, it is the bar that makes and changes the statutes. Collectively, through the bar, you can make an incredible difference in the lives of all citizens, ensure justice and fairness, and withstand governmental and other attacks on the rule of law, the judiciary, and the justice system. Collectively, you can ensure that the Atticus Finch of this generation would not stand alone.

What do you see as the biggest challenges for young lawyers? The current economy is certainly a big challenge for young lawyers today. Jobs are scarcer, the competition is fiercer, and many

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face staggering education debts. Even when times are good, lawyers have long struggled with the pressures of the profession and maintaining work-life balance.

What advice would you offer to young lawyers? It's very basic, but so often overlooked: Always do your very best. It's also crucial to always be prepared, work in a collegial way with those in your firm, share praise with your team, and always take care of your clients. I would also advise young lawyers to get involved in the bar. Business-related pressures can become overwhelming for lawyers, especially

young lawyers. But we need to make sure that we never forget the importance of the rule of law to our system of government and lawyers' obligation to assure equal justice for all. These principles are sacrosanct to lawyers, and the bar offers many ways to support these ideals.

What have you enjoyed the most about practicing law? Lawyers are the architects of society. As the trial lawyer Daniel Webster said, "There is no greater professional calling than to stand as a lawyer at the bar of justice and breathe life into the Constitution, the Bill of Rights, statutory law, and common law by defining, asserting, and defending the rights of citizens." This sentiment remains as relevant

today as when he spoke it nearly two centuries ago, and it's what I appreciate most about being a lawyer.

On behalf of the YLC, I thank Carolyn for sharing her experiences, wisdom, and advice. Her remarks remind me of why I am a lawyer and why I am involved in the YLC. May each of us follow Carolyn's lead in defending liberty and pursuing justice in our legal practice and through service to the bar.

Editor's note: Carolyn B. Lamm practices in Washington, D.C.