

After 29 Years of ‘Growing Where she was Planted,’ Gale Cartwright Uproots from the Bar

At her desk, stacked with papers, decorated with photos, and spotted with mementos of her time at the Virginia State Bar, Gale Cartwright reminisces about her years of wrangling lawyers into compliance.

“Earlier, working in MCLE, when the numbers were smaller, I was kind of like mother hen over the people who were not in compliance,” she says, in her quiet way of speaking. “And generally speaking, no one got suspended that I hadn’t talked to, if I could get a hold of them.”

Cartwright retired on July 9 after 29 years at the bar, having started at an entry level position, overseen a departmental merge that more efficiently serves Virginia lawyers, and eventually led a staff of 14. As the director of member compliance, Cartwright calls her role customer-service oriented, focused on helping lawyers stay in compliance with their dues and continuing education — before there’s trouble. Known around the office for her collection of colored eyeglasses, she also holds the distinction of having been the only person to win the Halloween costume contest twice.

Gale was working for an automotive parts warehouse when she saw an ad in the newspaper about the Virginia State Bar needing a staff assistant in the membership department. She started in 1989.

“I came here not even knowing there was a such a thing as a bar,” she says.

Cartwright applied for and received promotions, eventually becoming the director of MCLE by 2000. “You know, I come from a different generation where you just do the job you’re given,” she says. “And you grow where you’re planted, which is what I did. And I enjoyed it.”

Cartwright is diplomatically mum when pressed for specific anecdotes



Above: Members of the MCLE Board and Deputy Director of Member Compliance Angie Conner present retiring Director of Member Compliance Gale Cartwright with a portrait. L to R: VSB President Len Heath, Kimberly Pierro, Zachary Kitts, Tammy Woodcock, Angie Conner, Michael Pierce, Gale Cartwright, Bill Watkins, Lori Galbraith, Christine Poarch, and Mark Brennan. Right: Cartwright and Demetrios Melis.

about lawyers with fantastical excuses for non-compliance — and whispers of a lawyer who has paid thousands in late fees and re-instatement fees over several years.

“We do have some of what I would call ‘dog ate my homework’-type excuses,” she says.

Cartwright says she’s had to talk a few irate lawyers off the ledge. And she urges attorneys to come to the bar sooner with any issues. “We will help you figure a way around it; we’ll find you some free CLE,” she says. “We will do those kinds of things, but we can’t do it after the deadline.”

On June 18, the department welcomed its new director, Demetrios J. Melis. Melis, comes from the Virginia Department of Professional and Occupational Regulation where he worked as the executive director of two policy boards encompassing nine regulatory programs and 75,000 licenses.

During his 12-year tenure at DPOR, he held progressively responsible positions in regulatory and licensing roles and is highly regarded as an adept



manager who is customer-focused and passionate about public service, process improvement, and employee engagement. He has a Bachelor of Science degree in Criminal Justice and a master’s degree in public administration from Virginia Commonwealth University and has participated in multiple leadership programs.

Cartwright and Melis will have had a few weeks of working together to ease the transition. Asked for parting wisdom to her successor, Cartwright tears up a little. “Take care of my girls,” she says. “I have really good staff. I’ll be sorry to leave them, but I know they will do a good job under new leadership.”