

VLRS: We Are Looking for the Next C. Butler Barrett

by Deirdre Norman

IF YOU ARE EVER IN EMPORIA (pop. 5,927), home to both the Virginia Pork Festival and the Virginia Peanut Festival, which attract almost 30,000 to the town each year, you will find yourself on Main Street and, in all likelihood, you will drive past the Greensville County Courthouse. Just across the street: the law offices of C. Butler Barrett.

Barrett, now in his 50th year of bar membership, runs a general practice law firm encompassing the traffic, real estate, wills, uncontested divorces, and civil cases that many lawyers in smaller towns must handle in order to meet the changing needs of their community.

Fourteen years ago, Barrett decided to join the Virginia Lawyer Referral Service (VLRS) as a panel member, becoming the 50th member of the service. He has gone on to become one of the most successful lawyers to use the VLRS, maintaining a 95 percent consult and retainer rate. Says Barrett, “You can obviously make some fees, and the VLRS staff are excellent to work with.”

In many ways, Barrett’s story is the story of many people who have left their small communities to learn the law and then returned to practice. Barrett was raised on a “row-crop” farm where his father—who had only a 3rd grade education (Barrett’s grandfather was illiterate)—put a great importance on education. Though his father toiled from dawn to dusk growing peanuts, cotton and soybeans, as well as raising hogs and cattle, “He would never let me miss school to farm,” says Barrett. “Even when I said to him, ‘Pop, I know you need the help.’”

Barrett went to the University of Virginia with a \$500 scholarship— at a time when tuition was around \$1,500—and then to William & Mary Law School. “I saw my father struggle through two major droughts, and that



was when I decided I needed to do something other than farm.” Barrett married his high school sweetheart, Betty Anne (her family owned a dairy and her father delivered the milk in Emporia), and today, after teaching school and raising three children, she works together with Barrett in the law practice.

Barrett’s office features shelves lined with the toy cars and tractors he has collected since childhood. It’s a warm room that inspires a sense of ease and must be soothing to the people who come to see Barrett with their issues. He speaks fondly of his clients—the woman “no older than my children” who is planning her estate after falling ill, the farmer who has married yet again, the young man who has come to see Barrett about the adoption papers Barrett handled for his adoptive parents when he was an infant.

He speaks with pride of the VLRS case he recently handled for a motorist whose license was suspended. Though the courts closed in ten minutes, Barrett was able to fax over a motion to rehear and help the motorist to get his license reinstated. Butler says he has no plans to retire, and though he laments the

loss of some of the civility and camaraderie in the practice of law, he clearly embodies so much of what is gallant about the profession.

Outside on Main Street, 80,000-pound logging trucks roll slowly back and forth between the freeway and the Georgia Pacific plant. Logan’s Diner is serving some of the best peanut butter pie in Virginia, if not the universe. And the law office of C. Butler Barrett continues to handle the myriad cases that make up the fabric of the general law practice, helping Virginians with issues from cradle to death and everything in between.

If you are interested in becoming a member of the VLRS, which has recently added an online portal that allows people to locate a Virginia lawyer 24/7, please contact Toni Dunson at (804) 775-0591 or email dunson@vsb.org.

