

New VSB President's Code Is Law and Loyalty

by Dawn Chase

It's hard to imagine Irving M. Blank in a room by himself.

Even when he is, you figure he must be on the phone, or sitting back reliving a conversation he had.

His stories — and he has a lot of them — are peopled with clients and former classmates; judges and lawyers; politicians, ambassadors, and clergymen.

And family. Almost always, the stories come around to family: wife Rhona, son Jonathan, daughter Lisa, their spouses, and the four grandchildren.

"My Dad loves to tell stories," said Jonathan T. Blank, managing partner of McGuireWoods LLP's Charlottesville office. "Maybe that's why he's such a great trial lawyer. He's been around so many interesting people."

"I'm about family and the law and the community," Irv Blank said in an interview before he assumed the presidency of the Virginia State Bar.

In the few weeks it took to put this profile together, Irv's calendar was full of family, law, and community commitments:

Practicing Law

Blank tended to business at his firm, ParisBlank LLP in Richmond, where he shares a plaintiffs personal injury practice with partners Leonard A. "Len" Paris and Keith B. Marcus, whose willingness to cover for him makes it possible for him to serve as VSB president.

Birthday Party

He whisked his wife off to Los Angeles for the final *American Idol* — a gift for her birthday. Rhona Blank was a huge fan, Jonathan said. As for Irv, "He knows nothing about *American Idol*."

Preparing His Inaugural Message

In pre-inaugural interviews, Irv fretted about the General Assembly's decision, for money-saving reasons, to suspend filling empty non-appellate judgeships until 2012.

"In my world, that's a big issue. I don't think you take an equal branch of government and virtually gut it. You need a courtroom for the rule of law to be applied. Whatever the reason, the public suffers," Blank said.

Grandfathering

With his thirteen-year-old grandson, Lev Looney, at his side, he was at the seminar "Free Speech, Fair Speech, Fear Speech: Civil Discourse in a Volatile World," part of the Virginia Law Foundation and Virginia Holocaust Museum observance of Law Day. Lev had recently been called an anti-Semitic epithet by another student at school. Taking his grandson to the seminar was Blank's way of helping him through the experience.

The two viewed a presentation of websites sponsored by hate groups and participated in conversations about appropriate individual and collective responses to hate speech. Lev's mother, Lisa Looney, said the field trip is an example of Irv's approach: "Learn right from wrong. Respond not from a violence perspective or a retributive perspective."

"I talk with my Dad at least twice a day every day," she added. Many mornings before he heads to court, "he stops by to say goodbye to my kids."

Giving Back

Blank attended the luncheon that honored Henry W. McLaughlin III on his retirement as executive director of the

Central Virginia Legal Aid Society. Blank has been on the CVLAS board for more than twenty-five years.

And Irv Blank accepted four clients from the VSB's Virginia Lawyer Referral Service. Director Toni B. Dunson called him last month to offer him a year off from his commitment to the service, but he declined. "I just think it's an acknowledgement that being given the opportunity to practice law carries some responsibility to society," he said.

Community Service

The day news broke that Israeli commandos had raided a flotilla carrying humanitarian aid to Gaza and killed nine people, invoking international protests, Blank was on standby for a conference call with the Israeli ambassador to the United States. As a fundraiser for Israel and active leader of Richmond's Jewish community, he wanted a fix on what kind of public relations challenge was in store.

Wedding Plans

He also made plans for a trip to Japan with Jonathan, to attend the wedding of the Japanese "brother" Jonathan had stayed with during a three-month student exchange years ago. When the "brother" came to Jonathan's wedding in 2001, Irv promised he would reciprocate when the Japanese man decided to get married.

"My Dad, with everything he has going on, is going July 19th to the wedding," Jonathan said. "That's the kind of guy my Dad is. He's just incredibly giving to so many people."

IRV BLANK WAS RAISED IN DANVILLE. His parents sent Irv, his brother, and two sisters to a strict orthodox synagogue for religious grounding. He later attended Virginia Tech, where he played varsity tennis. He also wrote a sports column for the Danville *Commercial Appeal*.

In Danville’s public schools, Blank said, “I was the only Jewish person in my class all the way through school, and had almost no Jewish contact through Virginia Tech, because I was basically playing tennis.”

Did he think about that much as he was growing up? “All the time,” he said. “Every minute of every day. It’s part of my being.”

Blank was accepted at the University of Richmond School of Law before his undergraduate education was completed. Tech credited his first year of law school as his last year of undergraduate, and he eventually received his bachelor’s degree. He graduated from law school in 1967.

He married the former Rhona Mandel, who became an entrepreneur. She once owned *Pretty Paper*, a Richmond stationery business.

Irv Blank had always wanted to be a lawyer, and he found that practice lived up to his expectations.

“I like people, and I like lawyers,” he said. “I love the stories of the law. I love to see the law working. You build some bond when you try cases with people.” He chuckled over memories of a time when lawyers, mostly men, called each other by nicknames such as “Chief” and “Horse.”

“I carried his briefcase when I was nine,” Jonathan said. His father took him and his sister to court and not only to temple, but to Greek Orthodox Christian ceremonies and African American gatherings, “where we were instilled with this ideal ... that all men are created equal.”

Jonathan remembers that, when he was a child, “a guy who was a bouncer in a bar” showed up at the Blanks’ house,



Irv Blank celebrates his installation as VSB president with his family at the annual meeting banquet.

Blank addresses the members attending the banquet.



“bloody after being in a fight.” Irv Blank helped him out. Now, the man has turned his life around. “Your dad was the one that stood by me and stood up for me,” he told Jonathan.

The younger Blank described his father’s code as “the rule of law and sticking by people.”

Daughter Lisa, who runs the speakers forum at Richmond’s Jewish Community Center, says she sees his commitment not so much to law, but to justice and fairness. “He always tries to show us the right path to the bigger picture.”

In Richmond, Blank threw himself into Jewish community organizations and projects that support the nation of Israel — “every Jewish agency in town,” as he described it. Six Virginia governors appointed him to commissions and boards that involve the Virginia-

Biography

Irving M. Blank

ParisBlank LLP
Richmond

Education:

Bachelor’s degree from Virginia Tech
Law degree from the University of Richmond

Family:

Wife — Rhona
Children — Jonathan T. Blank, Lisa B. Looney
Four grandchildren

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Israel relationship. He founded and still serves as treasurer of the Virginia Congressional Committee, a political action committee that contributes to candidates who support a strong United States-Israel relationship.

On the Virginia Tech campus where Blank was so isolated from other Jews in his undergraduate years, he is now involved in a \$3 million fundraising effort to build a Hillel House, where students can “further their Jewish identity while becoming part of the Hokie nation,” he said.

Last year, the Richmond Jewish Community Federation awarded him its highest honor, the Distinguished Community Service Award.

At the Virginia Holocaust Museum in Richmond, Blank was cochair for fundraising to build a replica of the Nuremberg courtroom where war crimes were prosecuted after World War II. Early in the project, Blank found himself on a bus ride with the man he was to succeed as VSB president, Jon D. Huddleston.

Blank described the courtroom project, and Huddleston, who was on the board of the Virginia Law

Foundation, talked about the foundation’s plans to change its grant strategy to supporting larger projects.

From this conversation, the VLF made a \$100,000 grant to the museum and established a commitment to cosponsor annual programs and a Rule of Law Award.

Despite all his personal projects, Blank has no president’s project planned for the VSB. “My feeling is to take the mission statement of the Virginia State Bar and keep this train on the tracks,” he said.

He likes the Virginia Is for Good Lawyer project created by Huddleston. “I want to find a way to continue it,” he said.

And he plans to keep speaking out about the moratorium on filling judicial vacancies and encouraging other lawyers to do the same. The VSB’s governing Council voted in February to express its concern about the proposal. But Blank said the bar agency is circumspect about any advocacy before the General Assembly, and he respects that.

“My challenge is separating my personal being from my institutional being. I’ve done that before, but that’s not easy to do,” he said. “Irving Blank,

lawyer. Irving Blank, citizen.’ I’ve got to make certain that doesn’t get blurred over.”

At his inauguration, daughter Lisa delivered the invocation and son Jonathan swore him in. Irv Blank’s affection is clear in the photos on the cover and on pages 69–70.

Lisa chose as a text Isaiah 1:17:

Learn to do right!
Seek justice,
encourage the oppressed.
Defend the cause of the fatherless,
plead the cause of the widow.
(New International Version)

“When people tell me ‘He’s such a good lawyer!’, I tell them that he’s one of the best lawyers I’ve ever met, but he’s a much better dad,” Jonathan said.