On June 17, 2011, the chief justice of the Supreme Court of Virginia, Cynthia D. Kinsler, did something that few, if any, chief justices of any jurisdiction would dare to do. She took her place as a “square” in a mock-up of the television show Hollywood Squares. She donned a farmer-styled brimmed cap and prefaced her participation in a standing-room-only showcase program at the Virginia State Bar Annual Meeting by reminding the audience she was nothing more than a farm girl from Lee County. Then she proceeded to give an answer to an evidentiary question posed to her as one of the squares. The audience burst into laughter and applause.

What had just happened? Maybe nothing else like this has occurred before in the seventy-two-year history of the VSB. It was fitting that the question posed to the chief justice related to nonverbal hearsay. Virginia’s highest justice and titular head of the integrated bar, had just nonverbally made herself vulnerable to those who practice before her, even at the great risk that the position she was taking on a point of evidence may come before her Court one day. What a demonstration to assure all lawyers licensed in Virginia that she was, is, and will continue to be a lawyer from Lee County, and “one of us.” Implicit, of course, in both her verbal and nonverbal communications was a message that all Virginia lawyers should hear and heed. People matter, and relationships among lawyers and with the courts of the commonwealth are at the core of our service to our clients and the society at large.

If, as former VSB president Jon D. Huddleston championed during his tenure, “Virginia is for good lawyers,” then Chief Justice Kinsler sounded a clarion call that in order to be good lawyers and judges we must be people who are willing to sacrifice the trappings of position and title in order to be good people for the sake of good relationships. Just as the chief justice was willing to potentially expose herself to the risks of transparency, we must know that good relationships come at a great price. If not at any other time in the bar’s history, today’s culture is caught in a vortex between image and reality. The image is that of high professional and ethical standards. The reality of practice, however, all too often shows us something quite different.

If that were not so, why is it then that when judges and lawyers get together they don’t exchange stories of how professionally or ethically lawyers have dealt with the courts or one another? Instead, don’t we most often hear stories of how sharp, unprofessional, or unethical someone has been before or outside the presence of a tribunal, all in the name of advocacy? Are we not then living up to an accusation of hypocrisy?

Aligning image and reality starts at the top, but it must have a bottom–up following to become effective. Leaders must conduct their lives, professional and private, according to the principles that honor the profession. If they do not, their message cannot be trusted. Those who follow must be committed enough to the principles of the leaders that they are willing and ready to join in the practice of those principles. There is no question that former chief justice Harry L. Carrico, took giant steps in the right direction to lead in the development and implementation of the VSB’s Professionalism Course. Yet, many who teach and train as faculty in this program today know that the former pedagogical methods of communicating ethical and professional principles may not be as appealing to this current generation as they were to former generations of newly admitted lawyers. We have heard that relationships and community are the forums in which today’s students best learn those principles.

So what is so important about June 17, 2011, when Chief Justice Kinsler donned her tractor-driving, cattle-herding, hay-baling, farmer-style cap? Could it be that she was telling all those in the audience that practicing law is about a community of judges, lawyers, and clients held together by the law, which is the glue of society that can be effectually mediated only through relationships? Yeah! And she did not even use words.

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