

He Ain't Heavy, He's My Brother¹

by George W. Shanks, 2005–2006 Conference of Local Bar Associations Chair



As we approach the season of light, the season of giving, of forgiveness, of generosity, peace and goodwill toward men, I want to take a moment to talk about those among us who view this time with decidedly less enthusiasm. I realize this approaches the political correctness level of dragging in the dead cat, but this time of year can be devastating to those afflicted with drug and alcohol dependency or mental illness. I am not talking about “bah, humbug” in the face of seasonal bonhomie. I speak of the type of genuine, gut-wrenching illness that much of society still views with medieval suspicion and contempt.

Statistics tell the unhappy story: practicing lawyers suffer from clinically significant levels of depression at the rate of 18 percent, versus 9 percent within the general population—and from alcohol abuse and drug dependency at a rate twice the national average. Lawyers' suicide rate is twice as high. I will not mince words or be polite: Each of you reading this article is in a local bar with at least one colleague who falls into this category, and you probably saw and spoke to her or him in the last week.

So much for sweetness and light.

But we are our brother's keeper. If we don't take care of our own, who will? To that end, more than two decades ago, a joint task force of the Virginia State Bar and The Virginia Bar Association was formed to address the problem, which was almost unspeakable at the time. Drunk lawyers? Why, that's oxymoronic. What a great joke.

Then the wave of white powder crashed on the marbled steps of our hollowed halls of justice and the jokes turned into felony prosecutions and lives ruined in public, as well as private. We could no longer whisper about these problems as if they affected only the weak, irresolute or insignificant.

And then, dear reader, came Father Time, with his bag of silvery gray hair, benign smiles of age and the greatest corruption of all, the withering of intellect and wisdom on a profession that prides itself on its staying power.

Today, Lawyers Helping Lawyers is a vital, vigorous program that addresses alcohol and substance abuse and mental disorders within the bar and within the extended families of the bar. (If your spouse, child, partner, associate, legal assistant or paralegal has a problem, then you have a problem.) LHL has staff experts to deal with these medical problems in the context of the legal profession. The consultation is confidential. It is not part of the bar's disciplinary system. It is available with a toll-free call to 1-877-LHL IN VA (877-545-4682) or to (804) 644-3212.

Why am I raining on the parade at this time of year? I have a genuine desire to get all of us to be leaders on this subject of untreated medical disorders. I also feel that we owe it to each other, and to the larger community, to fix what we can and to lobby others to fix what we cannot. This one we can fix.

Those of you who have attended the Solo and Small-Firm Forums and Town

Hall Meetings sponsored by the Supreme Court of Virginia and the VSB Conference of Local Bar Associations have already learned of the outreach and availability of Lawyers Helping Lawyers from Jim Leffler, its enthusiastic and highly-qualified executive director. For those of you who have not yet attended, please do so. Few of the lawyers who attended the four presentations around the state knew about Lawyers Helping Lawyers before they attended. Ads (some of the catchiest and clever I have seen in a bar publication) aren't getting the word out.

So here I am, getting the word out to the folks who really count in our profession—the practitioners in the local bars, who tend to the day-to-day legal needs of 7.5 million Virginians. That's 14,852 of us who perform this service. There are not enough of us. There can never be enough good lawyers.

You can do your part. Don't just give your inebriated colleague a ride home. Save her life. Call Lawyers Helping Lawyers for advice and assistance. Don't just view mental lapses by a befuddled opponent as a tactical gift from the gods of litigation. Get help for your colleague from Lawyers Helping Lawyers.

Don't just do it because it's the right thing to do. Do it because he's your brother. ☺

¹ Motto for Boys Town, (1941)
Song written by B. Scott and B. Russell
The Hollies (1970)
Neil Diamond (1970)
Olivia Newton-John (1976)