

YOUNG LAWYERS

Jasmine Morton

Chairperson
Young Lawyers Section
The West Virginia State Bar



THE NEED FOR YOUNG ATTORNEYS IN RURAL WEST VIRGINIA

As those who read my last column know, I am from rural West Virginia – Webster Springs, Webster County, to be exact. Presently, there are only six attorneys in the whole county, and that number includes the judge, prosecutor and assistant prosecutor. Moreover, the remaining three attorneys do not practice full time. I know some may think, “Well it’s only Webster County, how much legal work is actually there?” I can assure you there is plenty, and not enough attorneys to fill the void.

I know this is just one example, but I have had the opportunity to speak with attorneys throughout the state and have heard similar stories. Out of law school most attorneys gravitate to Charleston, Morgantown or Wheeling – after

all that is where the work is, right? What most do not realize is how much potential rural West Virginia holds for a young attorney.

Many of the baby boomer era attorneys are nearing the age in which they want to retire, but how can they when they are the only lawyer in their small town? These seasoned attorneys ask themselves, “How can I let down Mrs. Smith who taught all three of my children when she needs a will or deed prepared, who is going to be there for Mrs. Payne when she wants to incorporate her new small business that will greatly benefit our community, or who will be there to comfort Mrs. Withers when it comes time to file the wrongful death lawsuit on behalf of her son?”

Many of these attorneys are a staple to these small communities and feel as though they cannot retire without failing so many that have depended on them and provided them with a fulfilling career for 30 or 40 years. This is where vibrant, young, industrious attorneys come in to play.

These seasoned attorneys are the best teachers any young attorney will ever have – trust me, I know! They will teach you how to practice law, but more importantly they will teach you what it really means to be an attorney. It’s not just about settlement negotiations and the big win; it’s about touching people’s lives and truly making a difference in your community. All too often people get caught up in the adversarial part of being an attorney and forget

what they are truly fighting for.

These seasoned attorneys can teach you, but they are unsure how to recruit young attorneys to rural areas. After all, rural West Virginia does not offer shopping malls and happy hours, but what it does offer is peace, serenity and a place where everyone knows your name and is happy to see

you. Unfortunately, that lifestyle is not for everyone, and those that would enjoy it are often too afraid they may not be able to make an adequate living if they take that route. This issue has been a topic with both the Young Lawyers Section and Board of Governors for quite some time and after years of brainstorming and attempting to create a line of communication between these two groups, I believe we have found a solution.

The Young Lawyers Section of the State Bar, in conjunction with Mike Mellace, IT personnel for the State Bar office, have now launched a program to bring these two groups together, the Mentorship Program. The Mentorship Program has a two-pronged theme: One, provide young attorneys with a person they can contact when they have a question about a certain practice area of law, and two, unite seasoned attorneys with young attorneys in hopes to strengthen the legal community. The Mentorship Program provides an individual with a searchable database in which he or she can locate a seasoned attorney in their geographical area with expertise in a certain practice field. More and more individuals are exiting law school and hanging their own shingle without a clue as to what they are really doing. It is called the practice of law for a reason. It is not something you learn overnight, and you sure do not come out of law school knowing exactly what to do. As a young lawyer you need guidance, someone to hold your hand when needed and hold feet to the fire when required. This program can

The Mentorship Program provides an individual with a searchable database in which he or she can locate a seasoned attorney in their geographical area with expertise in a certain practice field.

do just that if properly implemented.

As a seasoned attorney you may be wondering what this mentorship program can do for you. It gives you a connection to a young attorney in your area you may not know, or perhaps it will give you access to a young attorney considering moving to the area, but afraid he or she will have

no one to lean on and learn from. So now you are interested and wondering what you should do, right? Log in to your profile on the State Bar website and volunteer to be a mentor. For those looking to slow down and maybe hand the reins over to someone else, fill out the questionnaire. I can almost guarantee some young lawyer needs you almost as much, if not more, than you need them. Even if you are not ready to fully retire, it is still a way for you to connect with young lawyers in your area that may need a helping hand every now and then.

Young lawyers, do not be afraid to venture out on your own. West Virginia has a tight knit legal community. You will find help if you need it. The Mentorship Program is just one avenue. ALPS has also started a similar program. I have lived all of my life in the 14th Judicial Circuit, which is comprised of Webster, Clay, Gilmer and Braxton counties, but have had the fortune to move about the state. For me, there's no place I'd rather call home. There is indeed an undiscovered beauty to rural West Virginia practice of law. I invite you to explore rural West Virginia and see if it suits your way of life. After all, there will always be a Mrs. Smith that needs a will or Mrs. Withers that needs a dependable attorney who can also be a shoulder to cry on.

If you have any questions about the Mentorship Program, please do not hesitate to contact me, the State Bar office or your local Bar representative. **WVL**