

YOUNG LAWYERS

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BUILDING BRIDGES FOR A BETTER FUTURE

One of my favorite poems is “The Bridge Builder” by Will Allen Dromgoole and it tells the story of an old man at the end of his days, crossing a dangerous chasm, with little effort. Upon reaching the other side, he builds a bridge and is questioned by a fellow pilgrim about why he is wasting his efforts building a bridge when he has already crossed and will never cross the chasm again. The old man informs the pilgrim:

*A youth whose feet must pass
this way.
This chasm that has been
naught to me,
To that fair-haired youth may
a pitfall be;
He, too, must cross in the twi-
light dim;
Good friend, I am building
this bridge for him!*

I was introduced to this poem by a mentor of mine, the late Wade H. “Jim” Ballard. Jim was the perfect example of a country lawyer practicing in the small town of Peterstown, never turning a client away because of an inability to pay. Often Jim would receive sacks of potatoes or other garden vegetables from clients as payment. He never forced anyone to part with their garden bounty but the appreciative clients were insistent to pay something. I met Jim because I was a friend of his grandson Jason Ballard who is now a JAG Officer in the Army. Seeing our interest in the law, Jim allowed Jason and me to hang around the office. We thought we were something else, a couple of young kids close to the magic. Unknown to Jim, we would eavesdrop on his client meetings.

His way with clients was masterful. I doubt anyone left that office nervous or unsure of the outcome of his or her case. My best memory is hearing him pounding his fist on the desk in reaction to hearing a client’s problem and exclaiming, “Those SOBs. I hope God forgives them because I won’t.” After the client floated out of the office on cloud nine I asked Jim about the big case. Jim laughed and said it was a trivial matter that didn’t require his services but the client just needed someone to listen to him. Wow. What a lesson. It should be obvious that good conversation is 50 percent listening but we often forget that as lawyers. It is easy to become eager to apply our specialized knowledge and assume we automatically know what is best for our clients. Maybe we do, but maybe, just maybe, we

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would serve them better by listening more. Thanks to my friend Jim, I will never forget to listen more.

That is just one incident where I have benefitted from the advice of a more experienced attorney. We all have our favorite memories and I am proud to share one of mine. The practice of law is daunting and creates a lot of doubt in young lawyers. We need to build bridges and we need not wait until we are more experienced. Young lawyers must start early in giving back to the profession.

Our immediate past Bar President Mike Frazier's platform was bringing back the congeniality to the Bar. I doubt if there is a better person to do that than Mike. He not only talks it, but he embodies it. He and Jasmine Morton, my predecessor, took one step toward this goal by hosting the Young Lawyers Section meetings at the same time as the State Bar. This allowed the State Bar and YLS to have their dinners together. It really was a simple plan that had a big payoff. How often do young lawyers get an opportunity to swap war stories with experienced lawyers from all over the state? There has not been a meeting that I haven't made a new friend, reconnected with an old friend, or learned something helpful for my practice. Mike and Jasmine have built a bridge for the rest of us to cross.

Additionally, the annual meeting at The Greenbrier was a tremendous success. Anita Casey outdid herself in putting on the banquet and CLE with top-notch speakers. It was reported to be a record crowd. It may not be obvious, but attending the annual meeting is a great way to give back. It's an opportunity to meet and talk in a non-adversarial setting. It is hard not to make

friends and share stories with the person sitting next to you at a banquet when you have to ask them to pass the potatoes. I would strongly encourage everyone to make arrangements to attend next year's annual meeting.

My plans for the next year are to continue building bridges and I have an excellent group of young lawyers helping me. My Vice President, Shannon Smith, and Secretary, Linnsey Amores, are two rising stars in the legal profession. I am always motivated by their drive and intelligence. My district representatives are equally capable and buy into the vision of our group to be bridge builders.

It is this concept that I think captures the spirit of the Young Lawyers Section. I was fortunate enough to highlight some of our various programs in an earlier article. As we are maintaining those programs we are developing others that I hope to announce in the future.

Lastly, being that we are a diverse group of young lawyers from all over the state, I feel our group should discuss issues that are important to a new practitioner. I will ask the YLS to put its collective head together and examine the issues of Public Defender Service billing and the Lawyers Assistance Program to write about in future articles. These are two difficult issues that young lawyers face. My goal is to remember the lessons from my mentor Jim, and listen. Then we all can work together to build a bridge.

I am truly humbled and excited to be the President of such a remarkable group. I know we will have a good year and hope any lawyer reading this will reach out to me with ideas or comments. **WVL**