

## YOUNG LAWYERS

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# REFLECTIONS OF A (NOT SO) YOUNG LAWYER ON AN UNPRECEDENTED YEAR

As I reflect on my time as Chair of the Young Lawyer Board (YLB), what obviously comes to mind are the challenges faced by our state, our country and the world over the course of the last year. In no particular order, we have faced (and continue to do so) a worldwide pandemic, an economic crisis, racially charged tragedies that have renewed the fight for social and racial equality and, most recently, an insurrection on our nation's Capitol. As my prior articles have highlighted, lawyers have confronted these challenges head-on, in varying capacities, and have led in order to carry us through them.

What has been somewhat lost in all the crisis and chaos of the past year are the personal and professional challenges and sacrifices lawyers, and especially young lawyers, have had to endure, and continue to endure, through it all. As

lawyers, we were deemed “essential” in the pandemic and were allowed to continue to operate during the shutdowns in the spring of 2020. Although the courts shut down at that time, our duties to our clients remained and our work on behalf of them had to continue. We found new ways of doing the work: we quickly set up remote office and telephone connections, and we quickly learned Zoom and other video conferencing platforms. There were perks — we did not have to drive anywhere and could wear sweatpants to work. However, there were also sacrifices made by us all, especially by families.

Schools and daycares were closed, and that meant figuring out ways to work in addition to taking care of and educating children. That obviously put a strain on families, and sacrifices had to be made all around. The strain largely endures as

schools have transitioned to remote and hybrid instruction models, leaving parents to figure out how to both work and monitor their children's instruction. That is no knock on schools or teachers, as they are doing what is considered safe and in everyone's best interest; but there is no question that the strain on families, especially families including people who are essential and on the front lines of the pandemic, is real.

Additionally, those of us who continued to work throughout the pandemic faced potential and real exposure to the COVID-19 virus. The risk of exposure was not just personal; it put those close to us at risk as well, including families, staff and clients. If a quarantine was required, that meant significant time away from work and family. Of course, none of that compares to those who unfortunately became

ill with the virus or, especially, those who lost their lives. The enormity of the toll on humanity from this pandemic is truly incalculable.

As if all that were not enough, the pandemic and corresponding economic crisis have created serious financial issues. Many people, lawyers included, have seen reduced work and income during the pandemic; some have lost their jobs altogether, putting a financial strain on those individuals and families. This financial impact will last for some time, which has led to multiple economic relief packages from the federal and state governments. Additionally, there has been a renewed push to deal with another crisis — the student loan crisis — which has been affecting young lawyers more than most other professionals.

A recent survey conducted by the American Bar Association's Young Lawyers Division revealed that, on average, young lawyers hold around \$165,000 in student loan debt upon graduation from law school.<sup>1</sup> Even before the pandemic, the student loan debt held by young lawyers was having a profound impact on their lives, including decisions on what jobs to seek and take and whether or not to marry or have children. One can only imagine that the recent economic crisis will further intensify those problems. The federal government took the step of freezing student loan payments and interest for most of 2020 and into 2021, but the loan principal has remained. There are calls for student loan forgiveness in varying amounts, but those proposals face hurdles and stiff opposition. A solution to this crisis is not yet known; but there is no denying that there is a real problem that continues to exist and must be dealt with, or further economic calamity could result.

Although the pandemic was the most visible of the issues in the last year, it was not alone. The past year brought more tragic killings of Black Americans by police and renewed protests and activism for racial justice and equality. We also went through one of the most acrimonious and difficult presidential elections in American history, culminating with an insurrection on our nation's Capitol that resulted in the death of five people, including a United States Capitol Police officer. Both of these occurrences have had keen personal effect on most Americans. I tend to believe that those effects are felt by lawyers more than most, as we have a unique understanding of the meaning and consequence of those

events on our society and government as a whole. We are also the individuals in society that are called upon most to respond to those types of events, whether it be for understanding or action. As a result, the past year has likely been one of the most — if not *the* most — difficult years we have ever faced personally and professionally.

As Chair of the YLB, the year did not go as planned either. Typically, the Chair would represent the Board at events around the state and at American Bar Association events around the country. The Board would also host two live Bridge the Gap programs at two different locations. Of course, none of that happened; but the YLB rose up and met the challenge. We were able to hold a virtual Bridge the Gap program this past November, which was our most highly attended event; and we will hold a live event (hopefully) in April at The Greenbrier. We were able to conduct our annual Christmas family adoption drive, wherein we adopted, through generous donations, five families across the state and provided them with a special Christmas. We also donated food and supplies to front-line workers around the state during the pandemic. To say that I am proud of our members, and their work and resolve during these challenging times, would be an understatement.

At the end of my term in April, I will have served on the YLB for six years. At this point, I am no longer a “young lawyer” as that term is defined by our rules, but I have thoroughly enjoyed my time on the Board. During that time, I have met and worked with some extraordinary people. There are too many to name, but I want to thank all of those who have contributed to the YLB and our mission to serve young lawyers, The Bar and our communities. Although my year as Chair was unusual, it renewed my belief that the young lawyers in our state are bright, dedicated and hard-working, not just for their clients but also for the good of The Bar and their state. Young lawyers have faced the challenges of the last year with resolve and perseverance and have come through them while continuing to uphold their duties as lawyers. Especially through these challenging times, it is clear that the future of our profession is in good hands. **WVL**

## Endnote

1. [https://www.americanbar.org/content/dam/aba/administrative/young\\_lawyers/2020-student-loan-survey.pdf](https://www.americanbar.org/content/dam/aba/administrative/young_lawyers/2020-student-loan-survey.pdf)