



Seniors in the Spotlight

This article will bring the spotlight on a number of issues directly related to our senior lawyers. As I gave thought to this article, the common theme was how important our senior lawyers have been to our profession and how important they remain.

Emeritus Update

Now, here is some great news! Together the senior lawyers, State Bar of Michigan, Michigan Supreme Court, and as far as we can tell most of the lawyers of Michigan joined in embracing the membership status of Emeritus to honor those who have served us so well. This status allows retired members who are age 70 or older or who have at least 30 years of State Bar membership to maintain their connection to our Bar and profession without paying dues. Although our emeritus members have retired from the practice of law, they will continue to participate in sections and have a voice in the future of our profession. For that we all are the beneficiaries.

The positive communications coming from those lawyers have demonstrated a grateful appreciation for being recognized. The calls, letters, and e-mails have surely

brightened the day for every one of us who have been fortunate enough to receive them!

In the other parts of this article I have attempted to highlight how seniors are continuing to use their experience, maturity, and love of the profession both in their continued practices and in areas not related to the provision of legal services, but which enhance our profession nevertheless.

Docents

Letters went out this week seeking volunteers from lawyers in the Senior Lawyers Section for docents' service at the Learning Center at the Hall of Justice. As docents, they will guide school children and other Learning Center visitors through the Center, and answer questions about the justice system.

Members of the section have expressed a strong interest in connecting the children who visit that wonderfully educational place with lawyers who had spent a lifetime exemplifying the vital role of lawyers in our judicial system.

I for one can't wait for that connection to be made. My thanks and the thanks of our entire Bar I am sure, go out to each and every one of those lawyers. Those kids are in for a treat!

Transition Issues

The senior lawyers who accept the challenge of serving as docents in the Learning

Center will have found a wonderful, creative, and rewarding way to put their years of legal experience to use for the benefit of others. It is never too soon for each of us to start thinking about how we are going to make the transition from full-time practice to retirement.

I want to share with you some very personal observations concerning the transition. Thankfully, better health care and greater attention to healthier lifestyles have led to longer and longer lifespans. Many lawyers continue to practice competently, ethically, energetically, and happily well beyond traditional retirement age. We must take care that we honor and support them, and help protect them from stereotypes about aging and competence. Unfortunately, however, the practice of law is very demanding, and a too significant minority of lawyers at every age practices beyond the ability of their health and mental energy.

Some find the transition from our most active practice to ultimate retirement to be much more difficult than others.

Those of us who have had to review thousands of complaints against lawyers have all to one extent or another seen something we desperately do not want to see—a distinguished career of many decades ending in a serious charge of discipline, stemming from an inability to maintain the level of energy or competence needed. From my days heading the discipline system of another state, I still

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recall one case where an attorney known nationally for his competence, ethics, and professionalism was allowed by his own decision and of his partners to practice for way too long with way too little help, and it came close to ending a lifetime of achievement with a devastating, embarrassing discipline.

With an aging baby-boomer population the magnitude of this problem could get much worse, and my observation is we must look at this issue in new ways in order to continue to protect the public, but also in appropriate ways to bring long careers to the honorable end that they deserve.

Together we must all do our part. Individual accountability of each practicing attorney is obvious, but not so obvious is how each of us can help our fellow attorneys during the transition time of their careers. Turning our heads to avoid what we do not want to see can't be the answer, but too often that is our response.

Each of us can look for signs of needed help and provide it. Some senior lawyers run into trouble when they leave a fast-paced practice with a firm and launch a solo practice, without ever having acquired the management skills to run a solo practice. For these cases, we at the Bar soon will be able to help more than ever. A new initiative approved by the Board of Commissioners in July will allow new resources to go to law office management issues, including helping lawyers move from one stage of their practice to another.

The bottom line: as a profession we must plan for the days ahead for ourselves and our friends who may need a helping hand. Our profession and Bar needs to be there for all of us, because each of us is facing the potential of dealing with these issues, at any age.

We are a competitive lot, us lawyers, but there comes a time when we must assist each other, and in so doing help preserve their hard-earned reputations, at the same time helping to maintain the highest standards of our profession.

Thanks for listening. If one life or one career is helped just by thinking about these issues, this article will have been well worth it. ◆