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Despite Challenges, This Profession Will Prevail . . . The Public Needs Us

On a cool November day in 1990, just a few weeks before my college graduation, I exited a classroom building in the LSU Quadrangle. I walked underneath the famed stately oaks and broad magnolias that shade inspiring halls. As I walked past the historic Campanile and down the steps of its plaza, I tried not to be nervous or afraid. I marched across the vast Parade Ground, crossed Highland Road, and probably muttered a silent prayer as I walked past the imposing entrance of the LSU Law Center. I was carrying an envelope full of dreams.

In my nervous hands that day was my law school application. Back then, it represented my life's work, so to speak — all of the data the LSU Law Center needed to decide whether I should be allowed to follow my dream of becoming a lawyer.

I do not remember when I knew I would be a lawyer. It was a long time ago. I was probably in elementary school. In those days, growing up in St. Landry Parish, most of the heroes in the history books I read were lawyers. Our nation, I had been taught, was a nation of laws, not of men. History taught me we are all equal in the eyes of the law. I wanted to be a lawyer. And, within a few years of that cool, crisp November day, I graduated from law school, passed our state's bar examination, and, like most of you reading this, was granted a license to practice law by the Louisiana Supreme Court.

For more than 20 years, I have toiled in the vineyards of our profession. Have I righted wrongs, achieved justice, or reversed misfortune? Maybe I have. As seasoned lawyers say, "I've won some, and I've lost some," and hopefully I have many more cases to argue. Like you, I am just one lawyer, doing his or her best. But, regardless of what any one of us has "won" or "lost" in our days of lawyering, together we have accomplished much. Ironically, the legal profession is, in an odd sense, a team sport. While we correctly understand that ours is an adversarial system, it is a *system*, and we are all a part of it. When one considers our work as a whole, we have done much to improve the lives of many in the fight against injustice and to provide equal access to justice for all. And, yet, we have much still to do.

Ours is a noble and distinguished profession. Lawyers and the courts have been essential to all aspects of American life — from the Declaration of Independence, to the drafting of the United States Constitution, to civil rights, to the regulation of interstate commerce, the war on drugs, the war on terror, privacy, technology and the Internet.

Lawyers and judges have been there every step of the way. It is hard to imagine a world without lawyers. If we look to television or social media, however, the phrase, "imagine a world without lawyers," might be the punch line of a lawyer joke, a smear or a clever meme.

Too many ordinary citizens think of us — all of us — only when they think of "quick checks" or "big rigs," the "talking-head" former lawyers who serve as "legal consultants" on television, or of "justice" dispensed by a celebrity judge in a 30-minute daytime television show. We are so much more than this. We do so much more than this. We are better than all of this.

"What do you do?" says the person at the cocktail party or a child's soccer game. We say, "I'm a lawyer," but what comes to that person's mind? Do they think of a fearless advocate who works as part of a system that protects life, liberty, property? Do they think of the prosecutors who keep us safe? Do they think of the child welfare advocates? Do they think of criminal defense lawyers fighting to ensure due process and fair trials? Do they think of hard-working, fair, honest judges — often working at less pay than they could earn in the private sector — grappling with law, facts and evidence to make the right decision? Do they think of careful counselors who analyze the tax code, Code of Federal Regulations, or complex business and commercial rules and regulations to help people start, maintain and grow their businesses?

Do they think of hard-working trial lawyers who carefully analyze the law, the facts and all the legal and medical issues related to liability, causation and damages to properly prosecute or defend a complex

personal injury or wrongful death case? Or, do they think of what they see on TV?

Do they think of a professional who provides a service they cannot afford? Do they think of a profession that is no longer relevant to them?

Do they think of someone who works in an outdated industry that can be replaced by a fancy new app, a Google search, a friend who works as a paralegal, or some forms they can buy on the Internet?

“What do you do?” they ask. “I am a lawyer,” we say.

Our profession is facing challenges from every corner — an undereducated citizenry, too easily influenced by television and social media; venture capitalists who view “the legal profession” as a new market that needs to be deregulated so that law firms can be bought, sold, merged or consolidated into other businesses owned by non-lawyers; and non-lawyers who believe one does not need to be a lawyer to deliver legal services.

There are some who believe it is a given that legal services in the future will have to

be provided by non-lawyers because our clients cannot find, or cannot afford, lawyers to take their cases. Meanwhile, many in the legal profession cannot find work, while others cannot build and grow their practices, causing a decline in law school applications and a decline in the prestige and value of our profession in society.

Despite these challenges, this profession will prevail. It must — for the sake of the public. As we move at warp speed into a new world of even greater technological advances — instant access to information, robots that perform surgery and drive our cars — legal issues will become more complex. But, as with every other significant change in American life, lawyers and judges will be in the thick of it.

Whether an uninformed, or possibly misinformed, public actually understands what we do as part of the system of justice — or whether the public has momentarily confused us with those who play us on TV — the public needs us. Our public needs skilled, ethical and professional lawyers. They need well-trained, organized, ef-

icient and effective courts.

Our role, as the men and women of the legal profession and the judiciary, is to work to ensure access to equal justice for all. The public is best served when legal services are performed by lawyers who are properly educated and trained, licensed, carefully regulated, receive appropriate continuing legal education, and adhere to the Rules of Professional Conduct and traditional standards of professionalism.

The Louisiana State Bar Association (LSBA) and you — its members — are critical to this important goal, and my goal as LSBA president is to work to keep the LSBA focused on improving our profession and helping ensure equal access to justice for all the citizens of our state.

I am happy I walked across the Parade Ground that day. I am proud of our profession. I am proud of what you — what we — have done for the public. There’s more to do.

Louisiana State Bar Association
Serving the Public. Serving the Profession.

LSBA Midyear Meeting

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