

Counting Down to June 8: Recapping Year of Recovery



By Marta-Ann Schnabel

There are no trailers left in my neighborhood. The last one disappeared quietly, without a marking of its passage. I no longer search for that kitchen utensil that I just *know* we own (for the last 19 months, it's been roasted potatoes only at our house; I just can't manage to remember to replace the masher!). Every room now has at least one piece of furniture in it. I haven't quite mustered the courage to chop down the Japanese Magnolia that did not survive the salt water, but the grass is sprouting in an encouraging way and the few annuals that I planted last spring around the trunk of the dead Magnolia seem to be blooming again. Sometimes I can go a full day or two without encountering a visual cue that takes me back to October of 2005. In fact, I think that there was a day recently on which I did not use the phrase *pre-storm* — or its antithesis *post-storm*.

But I lost another employee last month. She didn't move away, didn't find another job, didn't go in search of a better opportunity. In fact, she didn't even quite quit. She just stopped being able to come to work. She hadn't been feeling all that well, and, well, it was just becoming too hard to juggle everything. Now she doesn't even return our phone calls; she hasn't picked up the personal items she left in and on her desk. And replacing her out of the current labor pool is proving to be next to impossible.

We seem to have become accustomed to this sort of juxtaposed reality; I frequently don't even feel the gears as they shift from handling personnel meltdowns to plotting legal strategies to tending to bar association business to watching the house across the street be bulldozed.

There are occasional moments, however, that bring the incongruity into focus. One such moment occurred the other

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day. I was sitting at my desk (a rare event in itself), and the phone rang. The voice at the other end said, "Hello. I was told that you are somehow connected to the bar association and might be able to help me." I paused awkwardly, noted the grinding sound emanating from those internal gears, and considered any number of responses. Finally, I found my voice and confirmed that I was, indeed, active in the Louisiana State Bar Association. For a split second, I thought I might just stop at that, but the gears moved again. "I'm the LSBA President," I said, as evenly as possible — although that phrase is not one that rolls off the tongue as a throw-away line. "What can I do for you?"

Predictably, his own gears hesitated. He was embarrassed to bother me; I was

embarrassed to have left the impression that I was bothered. And, of course, it turned out that the gentleman was asking something only the staff could answer. Then I ran out the door to a meeting at the Supreme Court.

My days as someone "connected to the bar association" are now numbered . . . so numbered that there is a "Countdown to June 8" calendar sitting in the lunch room of my office. This is largely because I had assured everyone that I would be able to work at about 50 percent capacity on firm matters while serving as president. As it happens, those assurances were misplaced, and none of my colleagues wants me to forget that. The calendar is a little reminder that it won't be long before they will expect me to attend depositions, go to court, maybe even turn in time sheets and send out bills. My clients might call again with some expectation of hearing back from me. My children will be weaned off of their steady diet of hot dogs and ice cubes (the limit of my husband's culinary skills).

And it won't be long until what was once our neighbors' home will become a weed-ridden vacant lot, until I can finally move the good china and crystal down from the attic and into a new china cabinet, until Lakeview has a grocery store, until the criminal justice system works again, until my morning commute does not take me through areas which evoke images from 1970s doomsday films.

This is my very last President's Message, a column traditionally devoted to cataloguing accomplishments. As any of you who read this page regularly must know, I am not much for tradition — or for boring, self-congratulatory lists. In my view, *it has* been a productive year — we, as a profession, have made some significant strides in the battle to retain

the privilege of self-regulation; we have revitalized our commitment to pro bono volunteerism, civil legal aid programs and public defenders throughout the state; and we have improved the public perception of lawyers and the courts by defending attacks on both. Of course, my view carries that recovery taint: look how far we have come, but, oh lord, we have so very far yet to go.

Results from a recent random survey of our members (which the consultant assures me is statistically valid and representative of the views of all of you reading this) remind me of how much farther there really is to go. Member responses continue to reflect a longstanding perception about the LSBA

— that the association leadership is comprised primarily of “good old boy” lawyers from large “defense” firms.

So, in this, my last visit with you, I am going to share what seems to be a well-kept secret: most of us who give time and energy to the bar association come from practice settings just like yours. Of the 24 members of the current Board of Governors, at least 12 come from law firms of 10 or fewer lawyers. The incoming LSBA president, Guy deLaup, is a solo practitioner. There are at least seven solo practitioners on the board and a couple of additional board members who have a single partner or an associate. Six of the board members are women; five are people of color. Two members of the

board have primarily a criminal law practice; one has a domestic practice; at least five would consider themselves “plaintiff lawyers.” And, yes, there are a couple of male defense lawyers on the board, but the guy from the biggest “defense” firm is African-American.

If you find none of this convincing, at least know that your current president is a girl from a small firm who has considered it an honor to serve.

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