



P R E S I D E N T ' S P A G E

J. Cole Portis

*cole.portis@beasleyallen.com or
bar.president@beasleyallen.com*



Listening Is Difficult

Listening is difficult. Maybe because we get bored. Maybe we are more interested in ourselves than about the person speaking to us. I have caught myself playing with my iPhone as someone speaks to me. How rude is that? We are accustomed to listening on our own terms. Typically, we prefer speaking to listening. However, quite often it is best for us to close our mouths and resist the urge to immediately respond.

During my term as state bar president, while I certainly wanted to inspire and set a course for the state bar that would impact a generation of lawyers, I thought the most important thing I could do this year was to listen to you. Fortunately, you were willing to speak to me—either on the phone, in person or by email. A great number of the projects we pursued this year were because you told me what was important to you. I hope that I listened well.

I listened to a renewed desire to emphasize professionalism among our bar. There were some passionate emails and phone calls sent to me about this subject. As I considered professionalism in the bar, I read the Preamble to the *Rules of Professional Conduct* which included these words:

“A lawyer’s conduct should conform to the requirements of the law, both in professional service to clients and in the lawyer’s business and personal affairs. A lawyer should use the law’s procedures only for legitimate purposes and not to harass or intimidate others. A lawyer should demonstrate respect for the legal system and for those who serve it, including judges, other lawyers and public officials. While it is a lawyer’s duty, when necessary, to challenge the

rectitude of official action, it is also a lawyer's duty to uphold the legal process."

I doubt too many of you have read these words before, but, even if you have, external rules, while valuable, only point us to the standard. For this rule to take hold, though, we must believe it internally so that it naturally flows externally to others. I suppose this is one of the reasons I pointed our bar to "love your neighbor." I believe that someone who is inclined to love others will more often than not display integrity, kindness and empathy toward others. On the other hand, someone who is inclined to be apathetic toward others will be easily offended when they engage with lawyers and the public.

Please know that I was proactive to address this issue that was important to so many of you. I spoke to lawyers and judges about professionalism. I asked the Bar Commissioners to discuss professionalism with the lawyers and judges in their circuits. I received some great reports about steps that would be taken to address professionalism. If we really want to change the way we interact with one another, though, then each of us must look internally at our hearts and determine if we have a genuine love for others.

I listened to you as you expressed frustration with the practice of law. Most of the lawyers who contacted me about this issue expressed their enjoyment of the actual practice of law, but too many of our lawyers in our state are hurting economically. I don't think it is big news to state that the law has changed drastically in the last 10 years. One lawyer told me that he isn't able to live paycheck to paycheck anymore because his clients are not able to pay for his services. Another lawyer spoke about his lack of health coverage. Through all of this, though, I heard this refrain, "I am proud to be a lawyer. I like my local judges and fellow lawyers."

Fortunately, the state bar has been able to begin to address some of these issues. Many of the issues are systemic and cannot be resolved in a year. After all, it took us longer than a year to get into the mess and it will take us longer to get out of it. Lawyers are smart and are critical thinkers, though, and we will succeed.

The state bar offers a number of services that can help your law practice. I asked our **Local Bar Task Force** to go to your bar and speak about bar services that can help you. I also asked them to listen to you about what else the bar could do to help.

Additionally, **Lawyer University** is up and running quite successfully. Lawyer University was created to practically help our bar members in this new era of practicing law. We have had and will continue to host classes that address the business of practicing law, available technologies to help you practice law efficiently and emerging areas of law to consider as you expand your firm's footprint.

After a great deal of research into the health insurance availability for our members, we were able to work out an agreement with the **Madison County Bar Association** that offered outstanding health insurance for our members. This was the best option available and I am grateful for the labors of many, especially the MCBA.

I listened to you as you spoke sympathetically about lawyers you practice around who are struggling

with work stresses. While we have a fantastic resource for lawyers who are suffering from depression, the **Alabama Lawyer Assistance Program**, I also encourage us to focus on positive ways that Alabama lawyers can deal with stress. We want to educate and encourage our members to be sound in mind, body and spirit. We have firmly established the foundation for this important work with the establishment of the **Quality of Life, Health and Wellness Task Force**.

You will see the fruits of our labors in the coming years. This program will make a tremendous difference in many lives.

I listened to you as you expressed gratefulness for the unselfish acts of lawyers who help the public. This year alone we have had the opportunity to help our fellow lawyers in Louisiana who were affected by the terrible flooding. We experienced an incredible year with our pro bono efforts across the state. Selfless volunteers are working on initiatives to help vulnerable foster children in our state. We gathered food for citizens of our state who are destitute and in need of a daily provision. We understand as lawyers we have a responsibility to be advocates for the public and we take this responsibility seriously because it reflects who we are as a profession.

I love being a lawyer—not every single day or every single moment, but I love what I do. Yes, there are many frustrations—a lack of a balanced life, work stresses and tough losses—but even those setbacks are good for me. They produce life lessons, lessons that I hope I can pass along not only to my children, but to lawyers I interact with in my practice.

Thank you for giving me the opportunity to serve as your president and to listen to you. You have taught me well. And I hope that I have encouraged you to love your neighbor. ▲

