



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*



Improve in Mind, Body and Spirit

In December 1993, I had only been a lawyer for a few years, but during that month, my mind was not focused on practicing law. Instead, I was looking forward to becoming a first-time dad. My life was the epitome of the American dream. I had a great wife, a great job, a great home and a soon-to-be precious baby daughter. My wife's pregnancy (from my perspective, of course) had been smooth and easy. Even the delivery of my daughter, Sarah Kathryn, was exhilarating, but medically it was uneventful. However, deep into the night tragedy struck. With no warning at all, my wife suffered a brain aneurysm and passed away later in the day. All of a sudden, my world was turned upside down.

Even while I cared for my newborn daughter, my perspective on life was challenged. My spirit, my mind and my body were stretched beyond what I thought was possible. Eventually, I was restored to a semblance of who I was before this tragic event occurred. As I slowly returned to work, I thought I was more prepared than I actually was. For instance, a few months after my wife's death, I was scheduled to try a lawsuit in front of one of my legal mentors, Judge Phelps, and against one of my friends, Frank Stakely. As the day of trial approached, I was unable to concentrate on the task at hand—working hard on behalf of my client. I was emotional and not as prepared as I should have been.

To be quite candid, I was a “basket case.” Fortunately, Frank and Judge Phelps observed my struggles and displayed compassion and support for me. Both of them aided in my emotional recovery.

By God’s grace, I think my spirit, body and mind fully recovered so that I could become a reliable father, a faithful friend and a competent lawyer (and eventually a loving husband to my sweet wife, Joy).

I know that I am not alone as a lawyer in dealing with tragedies. “Life” often hits us when we least expect it. Sometimes we handle these setbacks well and other times we don’t respond well at all. As lawyers, our lives have an added layer of stress. We have chosen an occupation that doesn’t rebuff stress, but invites it.

Data at the Center for Disease Control and Prevention reveals that the legal profession ranked fourth in suicide deaths by profession. According to the American Psychological Association, lawyers are almost four times more likely to suffer from depression than non-lawyers. Adversity for us is second nature to our profession. Being the advisors, the fixers and

the caretakers of others is what we do. We do it quite well, but we must do all that we can to reverse these statistics and begin to take care of ourselves.

The Alabama State Bar already has in place the **Alabama Lawyer Assistance Program (ALAP)**. **Robert Thornhill**, the director, and the multitude of lawyer volunteers stand ready to help lawyers who are currently battling mental health issues. This program offers intervention, monitoring and referral sources for lawyers who suffer from depression and stress. So, if you are struggling mentally or emotionally right now, I plead with you to call them at (334) 834-7576 or (334) 224-6920. All conversations are confidential.

While ALAP helps those currently struggling, I also am implementing a health and wellness initiative to help us be prepared on the front end before the tough times come. **Clay Hornsby, David Martin and Emily Baggett** are leading a task force to help all of us improve in mind, body and spirit. Over the next year and beyond, this task force will highlight areas of wellness that will help us enhance our mental well-being, our physical bodies and spiritual lives.

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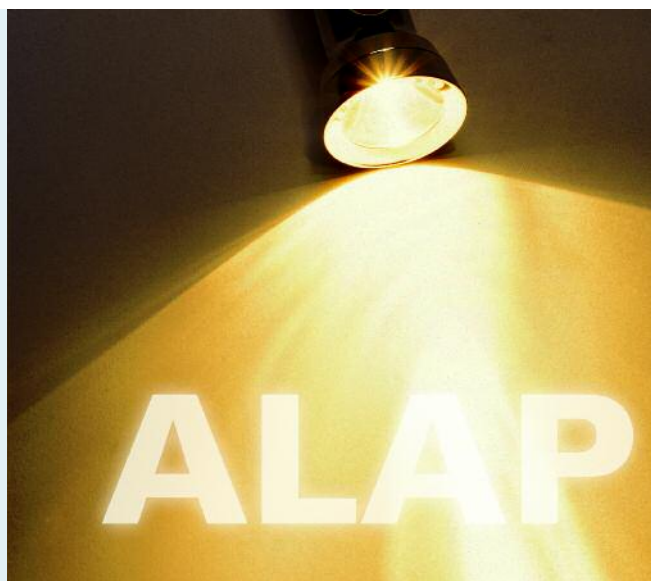
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As a profession, we need to be an example to others, including our spouses, our children, our friends and even other professions to let them know that it is acceptable to seek help and to take a proactive stance to improve our lives and be prepared for the difficulties that life will surely bring.

We won't be advocating that all lawyers become fitness fanatics or diet gurus, but we may provide you with information and opportunities to become physically fit, including offering better food options to consider and healthy choices at our state bar events. Maybe there will be excellent information on leading a balanced life or how to handle anxiety or stress, including suggestions for counseling. The task force is working on all of these issues.

Please take stock of your own well-being. Are you sleeping enough so you can be mentally alert to face your daily challenges? Are you eating healthy enough to provide your body with the fuel it needs to persevere through your day? In terms of exercise, are you strengthened and built-up enough to endure what lies ahead? Or, instead of increasing your activities, maybe you need to slow down and stop trying to conquer a world that cannot be conquered.

I know that I fall short in all of these areas. However, I am committed to action—to improve in mind, body and spirit. Will you join me and the health and wellness task force in improving our profession and the lives that we touch? ▲



ALAP Provides Lifeline And Light through the Darkness of Addiction, Mental Health Problems

Just ask **Robert Thornhill** about his life, and he will be the first to tell you that he has received a “miraculous gift.” It’s a gift that we all need at different points and to varying degrees in order to maintain overall health and wellness: a second chance.

Maybe your supervisor has allowed you to fix a mistake or you’ve made a bad first impression on a future friend. Regardless of the situation, we should all be able to relate to needing one more chance to get it right, and, for some, that opportunity is life-changing.

In Thornhill’s case, it’s what was needed to break the grips of addiction, leading him to his current position as the director of the Alabama Lawyer Assistance Program (ALAP), which aims to lend a helping hand to lawyers, judges and law students who suffer from substance use disorders and other types of mental health disorders.

The program, with oversight and support from the non-profit Alabama Lawyer Assistance Foundation, provides evaluation, assessment and referral services with peer and facilitated support programs to help address issues facing many Alabamians in the legal profession.

“Working in this field really keeps me very aware that addiction is out there, that it is a tremendous problem in our country. It’s a huge problem in this profession, and it gives me a lot of gratitude for the recovery I have,” said Thornhill, a licensed professional counselor and a certified addiction therapist. “On one end, this work can be exhilarating, as lives and careers are literally saved and families reunited, but on the other end, we see jails and institutions and death. Ultimately for those of us in recovery, being able to do service work and help those still suffering is one of the highlights of our lives.”

All substance use disorders are brain diseases, he said, and though progress has been made, preconceived notions of addiction, along with symptoms of the disease itself, often make it difficult for those affected to seek help.