



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

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Using Our Talents to Love Our Neighbors

Love your neighbor. We must do more than agree with this truth. We must open our eyes and our hearts to see the needs around us and respond.

All of us can agree that many people have displayed unselfish love to us throughout our lives. Maybe it was your parents who sacrificed their time and resources to help you be successful. Maybe it was a coach or a teacher who pushed you to be your best you. Or, maybe it was a seasoned attorney or judge who mentored you in the practice of law. Regardless, we can all admit that other people have affected our lives in ways that shaped who we are. It is quite sobering to consider the kindness that has been shown to each of us by others. We recognize that such kindness, or sacrificial love,

must not be wasted, but shared and passed down to others.

I suspect that most, if not all of you, have had a profound and positive impact in the lives of others. You were blessed with mental and physical skills that allowed you to meet the needs of others. You learned life lessons along the way through suffering or experience that allowed you to empathize with others and counsel them.

Based on my life, I find it is easier to make an impact on those who are near to me—my spouse, my children, my friends—but what about the neighbors we don't really know? What about the neighbors who don't look like us, talk like us, live in our neighborhoods or attend the same places of worship that we do?



Wouldn't we agree that their lives are valuable and worth expending time and resources to make our communities, our state and our nation a better place?

In October, lawyers celebrated Pro Bono (for the public good) Month. This is the month that we focus on providing free civil legal services to the poor. We want to draw the attention of lawyers and the public to the necessity of this program. While our purpose is excellent, I also hope that lawyers in our state will consider the fact that providing free civil legal advice is a selfless opportunity to love your neighbor—probably a neighbor who has a completely different life experience than you. This is not only an opportunity to use your unique skill set to help another human in a stressful situation, but an opportunity to make a new friend and receive numerous blessings.

Due to their selfless work, lawyers in Alabama are receiving many blessings by representing the poor in civil cases. I recently heard about some cases involving Alabama lawyers who assisted pro bono clients. One lawyer helped ease overbearing debt that weighed down his client by ensuring that his client received benefits that the client was due. Another aided someone by obtaining various probate documents to bring closure to a loved one who passed away. Still another lawyer eased the concerns of an elderly client who needed assistance with bankruptcy matters caused by significant medical bills. The time expended by these lawyers was not significant, but the positive impact they made was enormous.

In the parable of the talents found in the book of Matthew 25:14-30, the master goes on a long journey. He entrusts talents to three servants, according to their abilities. Two of the servants put the money to good use and doubled what their master had given them. The other was afraid. He hid his talent. Even though he was able to return that one talent to his master when he returned, he was chastised for not putting it to good use.

We can personalize this parable with our modern understanding of the word talent as being our unique abilities as lawyers. If we don't put our abilities to use in the world, they are useless. On the other hand, faithful investment of what we are given produces fruitfulness. Therefore, we, as a profession, must multiply our talents by putting them to use in the service of others.

I am grateful to be a part of a profession that has both the ability and the opportunities to encourage, counsel and love our neighbors. May we never lose sight of the talents given to us and may we go forth and do good works. Let us stand in the gap to help those who need it most. ▲

Poverty Simulation PROGRAM

Provides Insight into Challenges of Alabama's Poorest Citizens

We've spent the past month talking about pro bono work, and providing access to justice for the poor, but just how much do we really understand about what it really means to be poor? To *live* in poverty?

I'm sure there have been occasions where a lot of us have worried about money, about paying bills, about paying back our student loans, about how to afford the car we want or the house we would like. How many of us, though, have really had to worry about how to pay our rent or utility bill, every month? And, if I should face such a challenge, I have a network I can reach out to for help if I need it, but so many people don't have that support system. What is that like?

There's a program that some of you may have participated in during the Pro Bono Celebration, called the **"Poverty Simulator."** As its name suggests, this interactive educational experience provides an opportunity to experience just a small glimpse of the daily struggles, challenges and choices faced by those living at or below the poverty line.

Eighty people can participate in a full simulation, which lasts about two and a half hours. Each member of the simulation is put into the life of a low-income family, assigned a role and a story—for example, an 85-year-old dependent on a fixed income; a 25-year-old whose parents are absent who has been left to care for younger siblings; grandparents trying to raise their grandchildren; someone with a disability or a past conviction.



About 16 members of the simulation class will act in the roles of service providers—employer, public school employee, payday lender, health care provider, social service agency, pawn shop, police officer, grocer and so on. The individuals in each low-income scenario must make choices about how to spend what little time, money and other resources they have to meet all their needs.

“Stress is the most prominent result of the simulation,” says Kristina Scott, executive director of **Alabama Possible** (“AP”), which operates the Poverty Simulation Program for Alabama. “You realize how much you don’t know. Living my life takes a different set of life skills than these people need just to navigate day to day.”

Scott earned her bachelor’s degree in history from the University of Florida and her juris doctor with distinction from Emory University. Before joining Alabama Possible in August 2008, she served as the managing attorney for external affairs at the Los Angeles City Attorney’s Office. Before becoming involved with the Poverty Simulation program professionally, she went through the program as part of a Leadership Alabama Class.

In the simulation, she says, almost nobody buys enough food for their family. Children end up low on the priority list, especially in terms of emotional needs. Their caregivers may be able to put a roof over their head and food on the table, but they don’t ask how their day is going, or the children get sent to school



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without money for a field trip or school supplies. They feel alone and afraid. Some participants turn to crime to try to make ends meet, or take advantage of their neighbors out of desperation, or get caught in a cycle of payday loans and pawn shops.

She believes one of the most important results of the experience is a powerful sense of empathy with the plight of poverty.

"I think one of the most important takeaways for us, as lawyers, is to learn to take a breath if your client is late, or you can't get in touch with them because they ran out of minutes on their cell. We run our life by a schedule and always have to be in touch, so it's frustrating when people we are trying the help, trying to *serve*, are not easy to get

in touch with," she explains. "This program helps you to really have empathy for the client and put yourself into their shoes. Remember, you are not asking them to stand in your shoes, but for us to stand in other's shoes and think about how much our lives could be different."

The Poverty Simulation program started in 2013, originating in Iowa, and is now owned by the Missouri Community Action Association. In Alabama, the program is operated by Alabama Possible, which was begun in 1993 as the Alabama Poverty Project by a group of concerned citizens, including Auburn University President Wilford Bailey, Auburn History Professor Emeritus Wayne Flynt, social work pioneer Eulene Hawkins and Alabama Baptist Convention President Earl

Potts. They joined with others across the south to study poverty, publicize their findings, teach undergraduates what they had learned and mobilize public policy to bring about systems change. AP is a 501(c)3 nonprofit corporation.

Poverty Simulation classes may be scheduled as a professional development experience. It is also presented to teachers, college students, faculty and staff who will be in service with low income communities and church groups. If you are interested in scheduling or participating in a class, visit www.alabamapossible/program/povertysimulation or contact Kristina Scott at (205) 939-1408 or kscott@alabamapossible.org. ▲

—J. Cole Portis

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