

Strength in Service

by Rebecca J. Britton



Rebecca Britton's Fayetteville civil litigation practice with Hutchens, Senter & Britton, P.A., concentrates on medical negligence, personal injury, wrongful death, civil rights and sexual assault cases. Since joining the Academy in 1992, she has served on the board, as vice president for public education, as host director for the 2005 National High School Mock Trial Championship, and most recently as president-elect. Britton received the Kelly Crabtree Award in 2002 for her work exonerating Lesly Jean, a former Marine who served nine years in prison for a crime he did not commit. She was named a Super Lawyer by Law & Politics magazine and has been listed in Outstanding Women of the 20th Century. Britton is a 1992 graduate of Campbell University School of Law, where she has taught pretrial litigation as an adjunct professor since 1997.

It is an honor and privilege to serve you as president in this coming year. I am grateful for and blessed by this opportunity, and humbled when I think about those who have served as president before me.

Our Academy was built by lawyers who exemplify strength in service: Charlie Blanchard, Howard Twiggs, Bill Thorp, Gene Phillips, Allen Bailey—whose defining question was: “How can I serve?” Allen’s legacy will always be with us.

The Academy’s foundation and legacy of strength in service must continue, and all of us must build upon it. And we must take this mission to the next level if we are going to turn the tide of adversity that we now face.

In the world of jury verdicts, political campaigns, and legislation, an undercurrent of poison has polluted the process. It is a poison that we find in even the most unexpected places. It is a poison that is destroying the rights of the people we protect.

This poison is a message and perception that has been carefully tailored, purposefully fostered, and repeatedly used to eat away at the strength of trial lawyers, the rights of our clients, and our nation’s system of equal justice.

As Cliff Britt pointed out in an editorial he wrote recently, “This is no longer a matter of poking fun at lawyers for a good laugh at a social event. We all have a sense of humor, but there is nothing funny about what is happening out there. There is a greater threat to our civil justice system now than there ever has been.”

There is no immediate antidote for this poison. It will take time and purposeful effort by each and every one of us to cure it. Robert Kennedy once said: “Few will have the greatness to bend history itself; but each of us can work to change a small portion of events, and in the total of all those acts will be written the history of this generation.”

Each of us must become the change we want to see in the profession, and each of us must become the change we want to see in public perception. Only then will there be the change that must happen to protect the people we represent.

In the coming year, the Academy will continue to develop and implement our efforts to turn this tide through missions of service to the public, the profession, and our peers.

Service to the Public

To serve the public, we will continue our public education programs. We started a great thing this year with the American Mock Trial Invitational, and we have continued to grow and develop our State Mock Trial program. These programs touch the lives of young people across our state and around the country in tremendous ways that reach far beyond what we ever imagined. Our efforts to serve the public in this coming year will continue to grow—and our public education programs will extend to public action programs.

When we conducted focus groups this year, we experienced a rude dose of reality. As we watched and listened from the other room, a statement was made that “Lawyers in our organization are committed to community service.” One of the focus jurors responded with: “Talk is cheap. Trial lawyers might do that, but I haven’t seen it. Don’t tell me, show me.” We will.

We recently launched on the Academy Web site our new Member Toolbox, which Guy Crabtree and the Academy staff have been developing for the past year. The Toolbox is an excellent resource for all of us. You can use it to arrange speaking engagements in your community and find talking points on issues facing your clients. With the key information and facts that will be available for quick reference, you can write and send letters to the editor

of your local paper and to your legislators. You'll also find tips and guidance on interacting with the media. In addition, you will be able to access public resources that you then can make available on your law firm's Web site. And you will be able to find information about local public service projects, as well as volunteer programs in your community and across the state, with which you can become involved.

I spoke at my children's elementary school last month. Believe it or not, we had a great time talking about the three branches of government and checks and balances. I spoke to the entire third grade, then the fourth, and then the fifth. When I finished with the fifth grade, the teachers gave me a mug with a big yellow foam star inside it. On the star, there is a card that reads as follows:

An old man walked up a shore littered with thousands of starfish, beached and dying after a storm. A young man was picking them up and flinging them back into the ocean. "Why do you bother?" the old man scoffed. "You are not saving enough to make a difference." The young man picked up another starfish and sent it spinning back to the water. "Made a difference to that one," he said.

We make a difference every day.

As Marian Wright Edelman, founder of the Children's Defense Fund, stated: "We must not, in trying to think about how we can make a big difference, ignore the small daily differences we can make which, over time, add up to big differences that we often cannot foresee."

Our individual visibility in our respective communities as professionals who give back and who are committed to public service will begin to turn the tide in our favor. We, as individual lawyers, are the antidote to the poison that has consumed public perception. We, as individual lawyers, must accept the responsibility to do something about it. Be the change you want to see in public perception.

Service to the Profession

As trial lawyers and officers of the court, we have a special duty to our system of justice. By serving our profession, we serve the public good, preserve our system of equal justice, and protect the rights of our clients.

The Academy will continue—and build on—our efforts to serve the profession.

We will continue to provide excellent continuing legal education with the creativity and dedication of Education VP Peggy

To build on our legacy of strength in service, we must remember that the strength of the Academy is the strength of the individuals who compose it. To serve the profession, we must . . . support and participate in the Academy's efforts . . . and be heard on issues . . . of justice and the rights and freedoms of our clients.

Abrams, CLE Director Robyn Smith, and Assistant CLE Director Veronica McKoy. We will offer more joint CLE programs, such as "The Good, Bad and Ugly of Dealing with the Other Side," which was a collaborative effort with NCADA. Efforts such as these promote professionalism and understanding between Bar groups and foster the common goals of the profession.

We will continue to protect the rights of North Carolinians in the halls of the legislature. With the outstanding, tireless work of our legislative team (Phil Baddour, Dick Taylor, Christina Medlin, Todd Barlow, Paul Pulley, Holly Bryan, Malina Brown, George Lawrence), combined with the efforts of our sections, as well as those of individual members, we will continue to be a formidable force in the General Assembly:

- We will fight for increased and sustained funding for the courts and for that which is long overdue for Indigent Defense Services
- We will fight and win a moratorium on the death penalty
- We will fight against all legislation that seeks to pour salt into the wounds of the most vulnerable, short-changing victims of negligence and those who are injured on their jobs

Our Committee on the Judiciary—created by Spencer Parris, carried on by Cliff Britt, and chaired by Adam Stein—will continue its work to evaluate the process of seating our judiciary, seeking out and recruiting excellent and qualified individuals to run for judicial seats, and exploring more ways and means by which we can support the judiciary.

To build on our legacy of strength in service, we must remember that the strength of the Academy is the strength of the individuals who compose it. To serve the profession, we must not only support and participate in the Academy's efforts, but also individually participate in this mission and be heard on issues that impact our system of justice and the rights and freedoms of our clients.

I challenge every member of this Academy to serve the profession and communicate with your legislators and your clients when you receive word about proposed harmful legislation. The cohesive and inspirational strength and determination of our members in the Workers' Compensation Section is a great example of this kind of effort and commitment.

When we serve the profession, we only make it stronger—and we protect those who need it the most.

Service to Our Peers

As Janet Ward Black stated during her term as president, there is "Power in Community." The support and guidance that members of this Academy share with one another through our sections and listservs are inspirational and priceless. In the coming year, we will build upon our strength in service as we increase the power of community among our members.

To serve our peers, we will institute a mentoring program that matches new lawyers with seasoned members who have sim-

ilar practice areas in the same community. No influence on a young lawyer is greater than a true mentor. No greater service can be extended to our peers than sharing the knowledge, experience, and wisdom that new practitioners need in order to find their place in their community. We will all be better for it.

We will serve our peers who carry out our common mission of protecting the most vulnerable—our state's poor. The Academy will become a resource and support for our public service attorneys, undertaking a joint venture with Legal Aid of North Carolina and Indigent Defense Services to offer opportunities for sharing information, networking, and benefits.

We will build and focus the mission of the Academy's new Lawyers Image and

Marketing Committee, in which we will work towards refining the message the public receives from us in our marketing and public service efforts.

As individuals, we must each focus on who we know in our legal community that we can mentor and encourage to run for political office or for judicial seats—and then support their efforts.

Sandra Day O'Connor once said: "We don't accomplish anything in this world alone . . . and whatever happens is the result of a whole tapestry of one's life and all the weavings of individual threads from one to another which creates something."

We will be part of the tapestry that creates strong legislators and a judiciary that has the strength and courage to fight the poison that has polluted the process. We

will be part of the tapestry that mentors and fosters better lawyers. We will be the change we want to see in the profession, and the change we want to see in public perception.

I challenge everyone to use Allen Bailey's words: "How can I serve?" It is through strength in service—to the public, our profession, and our peers—that we will turn the tide. I look forward to the challenges of the coming year. I look forward to facing them together. ■



CALENDAR

SEPTEMBER

September 6

Ethics for Legal Assistants (VIDEO)

Asheville, Raleigh

September 13

Ethics for Legal Assistants (VIDEO)

Morehead City

September 14–15

Practical Skills for New (and Not-So-New) Attorneys (LIVE)

Academy Headquarters, Raleigh

September 15

Preparing for the Social Security Specialization Exam (LIVE)

Academy Headquarters, Raleigh

September 22

Basic Workers' Comp Practice (LIVE)

Sheraton Four Seasons, Greensboro

September 27–29

Capital College (LIVE)

Academy Headquarters, Raleigh

OCTOBER

October 6

Liens and Claims Against Personal Injury Recoveries (LIVE)

Academy Headquarters, Raleigh

October 19–22

Mountain Magic (LIVE)

Grove Park Inn, Asheville

October 20

Legal Assistants Seminar (LIVE)

Grove Park Inn, Asheville

NOVEMBER

November 3

Insurance Law (LIVE)

Academy Headquarters, Raleigh

November 17

Motions Practice (LIVE)

Academy Headquarters, Raleigh

November 17

Meth 101: Strategies for Defending a Meth Case in North Carolina (LIVE)

Renaissance Hotel, Asheville

DECEMBER

December 1

Workplace Torts & Workers' Comp (LIVE)

The Friday Center, Chapel Hill

December 8

Social Security Practice (LIVE)

Location TBD

JANUARY 2007

January 12

Death Penalty 2007 (LIVE)

Location TBD

January 12

Family Law Seminar (LIVE)

Academy Headquarters, Raleigh

January 19

Disbursements 2007 (LIVE)

Location TBD

January 19

DWI 2007 (LIVE)

Location TBD

MARCH

March 2

Workers' Comp Roundtable (LIVE)

Academy Headquarters, Raleigh

March 14

Legal Assistants Seminar (LIVE)

Academy Headquarters, Raleigh

March 23

2nd Solo & Small Firm Symposium (LIVE)

Location TBD

March 30

Professional Negligence Seminar

Academy Headquarters, Raleigh

Questions?

For information about seminars and scheduling call the Academy at 800.688.1413 or 919.832.1413

Register for seminars online or download CLE brochures at www.ncatl.org