

A Cause For Celebration

The 40th Anniversary of the Young Lawyers Section
of the Chicago Bar Association.

by David C. Hilliard

*"You are a philosopher, Dr. Johnson.
I have tried in my time to be a philosopher;
but, I don't know how, cheerfulness
was always breaking in."*

Oliver Edwards to Samuel Johnson, 1778

I. Introduction

We began as one of the largest organizations of young lawyers in America 40 years ago, and have seen our ranks grow from 3,000 members to over 9,000 today. From the outset, we have focused our efforts on community service and professional development. Cheerfulness has always been a part of us. It helps us accomplish our goals, even our most serious goals, and helps us seek out innovative ideas to address real needs.

Most of the lawyers practicing in Chicago today have been members of our Young Lawyers Section. Many have been deeply involved. We never espoused a philosophy, but have focused from the beginning on the problem of method. It is a tribute to our leadership through the years that we have kept our profound openness to new ideas and our willingness to create a haven for solving new challenges.

We began with a full schedule of committee meetings at 7:30 a.m. while our senior partners were still riding the train to the office. Now we are the senior partners with a sense of reality developed here that eliminates the need for such subterfuge!

Last Fall, Justice John Paul Stevens enthusiastically accepted an honorary membership in the Young Lawyers Section bestowed upon him by our Chair, Jill Eckert McCall. He was absolutely delighted when Jill told him it was "perpetual!"

II. High Praise

On the very first performance of Pygmalion in 1914, George Bernard Shaw is reported to have had the following exchange of telegrams with his leading lady, Mrs. Patrick Campbell, who played Eliza Doolittle:

Shaw: "MAGNIFICENT. SUPERB. NEVER BETTER."

Mrs. Pat: "YOUR GENEROUS PRAISE QUITE UNDESERVED."

Shaw: "I WAS TALKING ABOUT THE PLAY."

Mrs. Pat: "SO WAS I."

What is it about the 40th Anniversary of the Chicago Bar Association's Young Lawyers Section that would merit such praise? On past occasions I have spoken of Tom Hayward, Tom Howell, Dorothy Kirie Kinnaird and other great leaders over the years. But on this Anniversary it seems fitting to sum up our heritage, especially our recent heritage, and look toward the future.

A. Breaking Barriers

There have been no glass ceilings in our leadership or involvement, with the result that women and minorities have provided our greatest strength over the years. We have benefitted enormously from their attentiveness to new subjects, new feelings and new complexities of reality. To date, nearly half of our Section Chairs have been women or minorities.

It was in solving basic human needs that our organization began and remains unique and strong. For many years, the Young Lawyers Section has been home to over 50 community projects and over 20 committees annually. In total, we have implemented well over a thousand different reform, educational and legal assistance projects. The beneficial effects on our community and profession have been enormous. Not the least, this outpouring has benefited all of us.

Over the years we have generally engaged in "project" activities with tangible, feasible and finite goals. Our project approach has led us to create spin-off programs which began as projects. These spin-offs remain today as some of the most important organizations and services in Chicago and have served as models for similar programs nationwide:

- We initiated the Pro Se Court and created an indispensable Pro Se Litigant's Handbook to teach citizens in our community how to use this new kind of court effectively. Both have become crown jewels of our Circuit Court.

- We spunoff our Creative City Committee to form the Lawyers for the Creative Arts to provide free legal services to artists and cultural organizations to help them feel at home in Chicago.
- The Legal Clinic at DePaul Law School began as a radical new Section project for the delivery of legal services not to the poor, but to lower middle income persons who were not served by any other legal assistance program.
- We established the Center for Conflict Resolution, Chicago's first public mediation service, which has become an indispensable resource for our Circuit Court.
- Most recently, we partnered with the American Bar Association to produce nationally our three part video series "Serving Our Seniors." The series provides training, educational workshops and outreach to low income seniors for the provision of pro bono legal services in the form of simple wills, powers of attorney and advanced health care directives.

Our adventurousness has also resulted in other projects including:

- A unique Law Explorers program that sponsors lectures and activities every year for young men and women between the ages of 14 and 20 who are interested in careers in law and government. Students at 100 Chicago area high schools participate in role plays concerning legal and ethical questions and, at the end of the year, in a national mock trial competition.
- The Pro Bono & Community Service Fair that spotlights both legal and non-legal volunteer opportunities in Chicago. Attendees speak with the manager of each project, receive written materials, and sign up if interested in volunteering for the project.
- The E-Mentoring project that pairs students from Roberto Clemente High School with attorneys. The project mentors communicate once a week with the student through email on various topics selected by the teacher. A syllabus and materials throughout the semester are provided to the mentors.
- Five years ago we adopted the William C. Goudy Elementary School that at one time was considered the worst public school in the United States. This continuing project provides hands-on assistance by providing school supplies, the painting of classrooms, participating in the "Principal for a Day" program and talking with the students first hand.

B. A Gold Standard

One of the great purposes of our organization is to open some windows from the law to other things. We seek to give independent young lawyers and the values they embody a creative community; one within which to test their own ideas about the public interest and legal issues other than those limited by their daily practice. We do this by attracting and implementing the pent-up ideas of legions of young lawyers seeking the hands-on experiences in life that make for great leaders in our profession and community.

Over the last 40 years, the American Bar Association has honored us 19 times as the Best Young Lawyers Section among our peers. In the same period, we have won ABA awards for excellence for 22 of our public service projects. Our Section and its projects have become the gold standard for young lawyers across the country who seek to emulate us or adopt our projects in their communities. Last year, for example, the American Bar Association's Young Lawyer Division honored our Chair-Elect, Justin Heather, as its Young Lawyer of the Year.

C. The Best and the Brightest

It is a simple truth that the people you meet here will prove to be one of the richest rewards of your legal career. The Poet Robert Frost once said "there are three great things in this world: Religion, Science, and, greatest of all, our interest in each other." Half our fun is sharing in the creativity and successes of others. For this reason, and to avoid hierarchy and facilitate mentoring, all committee chairs are automatically made members of the Executive Council. Everyone is free to stir the pot! We have an openness to ideas, a willingness to help implement those ideas and a cheerfulness in doing so. Indeed, cheerfulness was always breaking in; it is a metaphor for our humanity.

We have launched federal and state court judges, Bar Association leaders, and many of the leading lawyers of our most important law firms and corporations. Our experiences here become the habits of a lifetime. Our ranks have led to U.S. District Court Judges Ruben Castillo and John Powers Crowley; Circuit Court presiding Judge Dorothy Kirie Kinnaird; Laurel Bellows who will be President of the American Bar Association next year; Terri Mascherin, our current Chicago Bar Association President; and Aurora Abella-Austriaco who will be President of the Chicago Bar Association in two years. There are just too many to list!

It's not all work! There are YLS Socials and other events including our much celebrated Texas Hold 'Em Tournament to raise money for the Chicago Bar Foundation.

Our Administrative Director, Jennifer Bertolino and her predecessors have been enormously helpful. They, together with CBA Executive Director, Terry Murphy and CBA Assistant Executive Director, Beth McMeen, can truly be said to have made it all possible.

III. The Next Ten Years

The greatest strength of our organization is our willingness to evolve, to search out new ideas and patiently provide the means to test them in the real world. Ours is a community of method in which old ideas are continually being challenged by new. In recent years two-thirds of our YLS Chairs have been women or minorities who have added new dimensions, depth and range to our activities. The timing could not be better as we enter our fifth decade with fresh ideas and opportunities.

Second is the ubiquitous web. How should we respond to the Millennium Generation's fascination with online social media? I am an intellectual property lawyer in real life so I have seen the effects of cyberspace on young minds. Recently I introduced an online gaming expert to an auditorium full of law students at Northwestern University School of Law. The first question from the students to the expert was "Who are You!?"

Our monthly Executive Council Link-Up and online Attorney Training Manual show the way, but many young lawyers are probably unaware of our events and projects. We are well set to develop new online communication techniques to reach those who are focused on music, sports or other social values. 30 million people played Fantasy Sports online in 2007! As the first Marshall Field said, "Don't blame the public if no one comes into the store."

The great task before us is to build on this great tradition. New human needs will be identified and ways will be found to help solve them. Decidedly electronic projects will evolve to make communication more effective among ourselves and within our profession and community. Some projects will result in scholarly publications, new legislation, or improved continuing legal education. New partnerships with the Chicago Bar Foundation will expand the reach of both organizations. There is much to be done.

IV. Conclusion

You will always treasure the friendships and experiences you have here. I salute you, your predecessors and those still to come on your great voyage! It is a voyage that inspired C.P. Cafavy's greatest poem 100 years ago this year:

"When you set out for Ithaka
ask that your way be long,
full of adventure, full of instruction. . .
Your arrival there is what you are destined for.
But don't in the least hurry the journey.
Better it last for years. . .
Ithaka gave you a splendid journey.
Without her you would not have set out . . . "

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