

It's a Noble Career: Bringing Professionalism Back to the Lawyer's Image

By Jay E. Michael

Since being elected president of the Columbus Bar Association, I have been asked, "Are you crazy?," "Why are you doing this?" and "Do you really have time for this?" My reply to these questions is that I want to make a difference. When people in my office get discouraged, and that does include me, I go back to my favorite movie, "It's a Wonderful Life," and the scene in which George Bailey's father is talking to him about the Building and Loan Association. The senior Bailey explains to his son that in a small way they are doing something important with the association, providing a path to homeownership for people who might not be able to afford it otherwise.

Why do I bring this up? Because of the stereotypes that lawyers are not to be trusted and that we create more problems than solutions. I often tell my clients that usually, if lawyers are involved, good things are not happening.

During my tenure as president, my goal is to project a positive outlook on what we lawyers do. If you look at the stories in the news every day, everything is bad. We sensationalize everything from snowstorms to war. Negativity breeds negativity. I encourage all members of the bar to diligently work against the negative stereotypes. How do we do that? I think the best method is through goodwill and professionalism in all of our dealings.

We, as lawyers, have the ability to bring hope to our clients. Most of our clients come to us at their darkest times. They are concerned about a horrible event that has happened or that will occur, and we need to counsel them on the law and also reassure them that the justice system works and can be trusted. Sincere compassion and attention to the client's concerns will pay huge dividends, not only in the trust of our clients but in our own success as lawyers. Goodwill is something we must have as the cornerstone of a thriving practice.

Professionalism and civility can help us overcome the negative image some people have that lawyers can be pompous, that we don't really care about our clients, that we play dirty. As professionals, we owe it to each other and to the people in our communities to work against this image. I am a firm believer that this is a noble profession, one that is worthy of respect from the public and our peers, and I want to spread that message through my interactions with my clients and other lawyers.

In addition to the many programs offered by the Columbus Bar, there is an intangible, intrinsic value to being a part of the bar association. It's not just about committees and discounts and social events; it's about advancing the profession in a

meaningful and positive way. It's about telling our stories in a positive light. It's about being a part of something bigger than ourselves. The Columbus Bar is the sum of its members, and we need you to help us continue doing all we can to provide a voice for those who need lawyers to help them through challenging circumstances and to ensure access to justice. You help the association and yourself by becoming active and taking advantage of all the Columbus Bar has to offer.

To circle back to "It's a Wonderful Life," some people unfortunately view lawyers as more akin to Mr. Potter, filled with greed and not to be trusted. We need to change that image to George Bailey. While he may not be perfect, no one can deny he puts his Building and Loan clients before all else and tries to make decisions with a sound moral compass. I am confident that all of us, as Columbus Bar members, can revive that image for our profession.



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