

Meeting the Special Responsibilities of a Noble Profession

BY MICHAEL G. CORTINA

THE PRACTICE OF LAW IS A BUSINESS. It matters not if a lawyer is on the bench, works in the public interest sector, is an in-house attorney, or is engaged in private practice. All of us make our living in the practice of law, and that means, by default, all of us are also engaged in the business of law. We sometimes need reminding, however, of the other obligations that we have to society.

Sometimes lawyers see *pro bono* or other types of public service to be a burden on their practices. Indeed, one attorney this author knows proudly refers to himself as a “for-profit lawyer,” and there is little doubt that this aspiring profiteer only engages in the practice of law when it actually does or has the potential to increase his business’s bottom line. While we can easily deride this

type of attitude about the practice of law, we must balance our thoughts by remembering that it is the business of law that allows us to keep the lights on and provide for ourselves and our families.

While *pro bono* work is an important aspect of a lawyer’s duty to society, there are other ways that lawyers can contribute. For example, in the preamble to the Illinois Rules of Professional Conduct of 2010, section 6 states, *inter alia*, “... a lawyer should seek improvement of the law, access to the legal system, the administration of justice and the quality of service rendered by the legal profession.” Teaching law students can improve the quality of service rendered by the legal profession, and that is part of how I help to meet my special responsibility to society as a lawyer.

I regularly teach a course entitled “Introduction to Lawyering Skills” at Northern Illinois University College of Law. When non-lawyers ask what “Lawyering Skills” are, I try to keep a straight face when responding with “you know, how to chase an ambulance without pulling a hammy – lawyering skills.” Of course, I then tell them what the course truly offers. Unlike the usual law school doctrinal courses, this is a skills-based course that teaches students how to practice law. Studying and understanding some aspect of the law is inherent in any practice, but this course focuses on teaching law students how to draft pleadings, issue and answer discovery, take depositions, properly serve subpoenas, how to counsel clients, etc. I teach not because I enjoy the hour-long commute to DeKalb, but mainly because I want to improve the quality of service in our legal profession. I tell my students that I want to ensure that they complete the course with the requisite skill necessary to properly practice law because it is one way for me to meet my obligations to society. I also tell them that if they put forth the minimal effort necessary to pass the class,

it is not acceptable because if they “phone it in” when they are in the real world, it reflects poorly on the both of us. I look forward to the day when I am standing in court and seeing a former student of mine appear in court and zealously represent a client. I look forward to it because when it happens, I will know that I had a small part in helping to develop that young attorney’s practice with the course that I teach.

With nearly 100,000 licensed lawyers in the State of Illinois, it is simply not possible for everyone to contribute to society by teaching a law school course. Everyone can, however, assist. Skills classes at law schools are increasing in number, and such courses are needed for when the Next Generation Bar Exam is implemented in the next couple of years. Skills courses need volunteers to help with the education process. Trial Advocacy needs volunteers to be jurors; Alternative Dispute Resolution needs volunteers to act as parties; Introduction to Lawyering Skills needs volunteers to be witnesses that are deposed, etc.

Many lawyers, from retirees to practicing jurists, volunteer to help with my class. Having someone who is knowledgeable about the practice of law volunteer to be deposed or act as a witness for a student helps the education process more than a non-lawyer because we have all been through the gauntlet and can make the practical course as realistic as possible for the students.


If you are looking for ways to meet your obligation to society that comport with a busy schedule, consider contacting a law school to see if any of the skills classes need volunteers. Doing so will help to improve the practice of law, and you will be helping to meet that special responsibility that we all have to improve the quality of justice in our society. ■

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