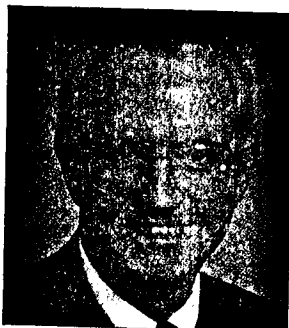


Don't Forget the Main Street Lawyer

These heroes of the profession go about their work quietly, one client at a time



BY N. LEE COOPER

The backbone of our justice system is made up of lawyers who perform public service every day, even if their most immediate concern is paying the light bill.

From time to time, lawyers complain about the fashion in which our profession is portrayed on television and in motion pictures. Often we are troubled by the presentation of lawyers as greedy, unethical or unconcerned about the needs of their clients. But one of the most deceiving aspects of the portrayal in the public arena is the way in which it glorifies lawyers from large, urban firms—lawyers who live and work in big, glass towers located downtown.

For anyone who has ever been in a courtroom, or worked in a small city or small town, you know the real "hero" of our profession and the justice system is the Main Street Lawyer. This is the lawyer who goes quietly about his or her work every day, making a difference in people's lives—and that is the best public relations.

What do I mean when I talk about the Main Street Lawyer? Simply, he or she is someone who works every day to solve people's problems and make the system of justice work fairly and efficiently.

The Main Street Lawyer may have a few elderly clients—the fastest-growing segment of the population in our country today. Lawyers help older Americans to maintain personal and financial independence and dignity. A little legal planning and advice keeps consumer cheats or serious illness from causing total disaster for the aged.

The Main Street Lawyer might have a child custody case. With the growing complexity of today's mixed families, our Main Street Lawyer is probably working to keep a family together, to ensure that an absent father pays child support, or to defend and protect the best interests of a child in a custody matter.

These cases can be heart-rending and exhausting. But they go forward each and every day with lawyers helping America's families stay together and grow stronger.

Lawyering Out of the Limelight

The Main Street Lawyer also might be found trying real-life criminal cases—without celebrity defendants, without a media circus, without the million-dollar billings or months in the Hollywood limelight that have made a mockery of our criminal justice system.

Main Street Lawyers help people caught in the maze of the criminal courts so they can move on and better their lives.

Many lawyers serve as the appointed counsel in juvenile cases—working for little money to help a young person who has never seen the inside of a courtroom and who would be lost without a lawyer.

These Main Street Lawyers are performing public service every day—even if their most immediate concern is paying the light bill. I am pleased to say that the ABA has strong programs to assist lawyers in all these areas—and many more.

Support Services From the ABA

The ABA Standing Committee on Solo and Small Firm Practitioners recently published a comprehensive guide for these lawyers. The guide provides valuable information for new lawyers organizing their practices, including practical advice on finding office space and agreeing to a lease. Most importantly, the guide gives practical advice to lawyers setting up solo or small practices, from how to bill clients to how to find clients and how to organize their time and practices.

The association also has produced a manual that addresses the special challenges confronting lawyers who are practicing in small and rural communities. Lack of mentors, potential conflicts and other practical concerns are addressed by the manual as well. At the same time, the ABA is moving aggressively to adapt new technologies, to make this assistance more accessible to the Main Street Lawyer.

The ABA Legal Technology Resource Center helps lawyers understand which computer and other technologies will assist them in making their practice more efficient—without their having to take time to wade through all the software being introduced on the market. But programs, technologies, and even membership, are not ends in themselves.

Our job is to make the ABA more meaningful in the deeds of our members. We can be proud of their work. We can be proud of the ABA's role in helping the Main Street Lawyer. But most of all, we must be proud of the Main Street Lawyers. For each day, in large and small ways, it is these lawyers who keep our justice system and our nation moving forward. And they do this unheralded work one client at a time.

Helping the Main Street Lawyer in this work is an important part of the ABA's mission.