

DIALOGUE

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From the Chair...

By *A. Michael Pratt*

Standing Committee on Pro Bono and Public Service

I am honored to have been appointed the Chair of the Standing Committee on Pro Bono and Public Service and humbled that ABA President Lamm chose this country boy, born in Grindstone, Pennsylvania, to lead this important committee that does such meaningful work.

As I contemplated what to say in my first *From the Chair* column, I couldn't stop fretting about my greatest leadership weakness - that I am sometimes a bit too passionate and obstinate about issues that strike at my heart. So, I think it important to tell you a little about who I am, what drives that passion and what I hope to bring to the Pro Bono Committee as its chair.

I was born in a small house in Grindstone, Pennsylvania. I was the fourth of twelve children. We didn't have running water in our home and our bathroom was an outhouse. To say that we were not people of means would be a gross understatement, but also not true. We were, in fact, a family of means because our mother made it so. We had the means to hope, the means to dream, the means to keep faith with our family and ourselves. And we had the means to work hard and to help one another.

You see, Joan Tracy, was a young mother who married before finishing high school. For a good number of years, she was a single mother who provided for her family with little money, but loads of love, personal sacrifice and discipline. But no matter how little we had, she would share our home and our food with anyone in need. I remember her taking in friends' children at various times to stay with us because they had nowhere else to go.

My mother also instilled in us the importance of education by both word and deed. I still recall the image of my young mother walking in the snow to attend classes at the adult learning center so she could attain her high school degree. After putting me through college, she went to college herself, often taking just one class a semester at a time, until she received

her college degree more than ten years later.

Growing up, I didn't know any lawyers. I thought I would probably get an undergraduate business degree, get a nice job and call it a life. But I found my way to law school, in large part, because there were people who reached out and engaged me along the way. They were kind, generous, ordinary people who wanted to see me succeed.

My graduation from law school was one of my mother's proudest moments. I remember on the day of my law school graduation, my mother took my diploma out of my hands and would not give it back. Come to think of it, I did not get it back until several years after practicing law.

My mother worked hard, and with help from my stepfather, she was later able to provide a better life for us. I'm proud to say that she also rose to become a prominent civic leader in her own right in our hometown of Uniontown, Pennsylvania. She also continues to work tirelessly for her community even in her retirement years.

We enter 2010 in unsettled times. How do we move forward with faith and fidelity in our mission? I believe the answer lies in the values I learned from my mother; the values of family, of education, of giving back to those less fortunate, and of providing equal opportunity for all.

The ABA's Pro Bono Committee has been at the forefront of efforts to build strong pro bono communities across the country. As chair, I take it as a personal challenge to continue and expand on those efforts. With the expertise of our staff resources and the multiple policy and programmatic efforts that have been developed over the years the Committee is well armed to fight for the value of equal justice for all. Our Committee won't rest until our message has reached every law firm in our legal community, large and small; every corporate law department; every government attorney office; every law school and, ultimately, every lawyer in America. The Pro Bono Committee understands and appreciates all pro bono work that is provided and all the incredible efforts by pro bono programs, but there is much, much more that can, and should, be done.

As I write this, the Pro Bono Committee is preparing to do strategic planning at its November meeting. I will be charging the Committee's members, liaisons and staff to be creative, aggressive and daring. We will continue to work hard so that we reach a level of impact that will bring America closer than ever to guaranteeing broad access to justice for thousands of disenfranchised and vulnerable individuals in communities far and wide.

Joan Tracy taught me to share no matter how little I have. Will those of us with plenty now dig a little deeper and give more? As attorneys, we have the unique opportunity to make a real difference in other people's lives. We make an impact on society. There is a legacy of service that we provide. I



look forward to working with the Standing Committee on Pro Bono and Public Service to fulfill this legacy.

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