

Securing Our Legacy as the Voice of the New York Lawyer

A number of years ago, then NYSBA President Joshua Pruzansky reminded us of the importance of focusing on the fundamentals of leadership, especially the engine of any successful volunteer organization – the membership. In the real estate vernacular, it's members, members, members.

Our Association's constitution does not even mention members or serving their needs. For most of our 131-year history, it's been somewhat of a given. We didn't need to be a mandatory bar. Everyone knew that if you were licensed to practice in New York, you became a member of the State Bar. End of story.

That dynamic has evolved over time, as the number of bar associations in New York increased, to more than 200 by last count. Across the country, professional and other volunteer associations are in transition. Most face flat or declining membership. While we continue to grow each year, we are not keeping pace with the growth of New York lawyers. If we are to secure our legacy as the voice of the New York lawyer, we must grow faster. If we are to continue to influence public policy at the highest levels, advance the rule of law, do the public good and advocate for those who cannot speak for themselves, we must depend upon a stable, and growing, membership base.

As a local bar leader, I had at first viewed the State Bar as a competitor. That was before I had the proverbial "light bulb" moment, when I realized that we could make a compelling case for why every New York lawyer should belong to the State Bar, the local Bar, and yes, other substantive, ethnic

or specialty bars. And no, one need not be a "bar junkie" to get the picture. Fundamentally, it is about making an investment in yourself, your professional and personal development and what that is worth to you.

Bar associations all bring different, and vital, programs and services to the table. I may not be typical (I have been called a lot of things but not "typical"): I am a sustaining member of NYSBA, my county bar, the women's bar, the ABA, a member of the National Academy of Elder Law Attorneys and a Fellow of the American College of Trust and Estate Counsel. My annual dues, which I paid out of pocket as a young lawyer, now exceed \$2,000 each year. And they are a bargain at twice the price. The value I receive in professional and leadership development, networking with attorneys on the cutting edge of my practice areas, the unlimited opportunities for volunteerism and pro bono, legislative advocacy, and the life-long friends I have made, is, in the advertising lexicon, priceless!

This is the first year of our 2010 Membership Challenge, which is about mobilizing our members, our leadership and our staff to spread that word. While your local, women's, ethnic or specialty bars provide valuable services tailored to their respective membership, NYSBA has and will continue to offer statewide programs, services and influence unparalleled by any other association in New York.

My challenge to you? Reach out to one non-member this year. Even more, if you are feeling ambitious. There is a reason we are members of NYSBA. Our membership provides value and relevance and informs who we are as



lawyers, as bar and community leaders, and as human beings. If you also believe in the importance of one organization that speaks with one voice for all the lawyers in our state, it is time to pay that forward. I can think of no better way to "grow" our membership than by enlisting every one of our members. What better entrée into this great association than one who already understands the value?

Encourage that young lawyer, that mid-level associate, the solo on Main Street, the in-house counsel or attorney in public service to look us over for one year. And make sure they join one or more of our 23 Sections that relate to their area of practice. If they believe that their personal financial circumstances are such that they require a dues reduction, have them contact our Membership Department about our Dues Waiver Program. If, after one year, they are not convinced of the value, or the relevance, of belonging to the largest voluntary state bar association in the country, have them call me. Or better yet, tell me why on my blog. Just go to the link on our home page at www.nysba.org. ■

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