

BENCH/BAR PARTNERSHIPS THAT WORK

The Mecklenburg County Bar is different from other Bars in North Carolina in that it is a mandatory Bar and only a mandatory Bar. We do not have a voluntary Bar at all. We do have a Foundation that is a separate 501©3 non profit.

As a mandatory Bar, we report to the North Carolina State Bar. This means that there are some things the Bar must do, some it can not do and many activities that are permissible. The permissible items have given our local Bar the opportunity to grow and develop relationships and community programs. We may not be a voluntary Bar but we have an extraordinary group of attorneys and judges who volunteer to make things happen.

We have just under 4,000 attorneys and a Bar budget of about \$1.2 million excluding budgets for specific sections. Currently, the Bar has over 45 Sections and Committees. The Bar encourages outreach to the community and to each other through a variety of projects. In addition, the Bar recognizes that interaction with the judiciary is an important component of a successful Bar.

The following projects are just a few of the examples that our Bench and Bar have engaged in which generated knowledge and respect for each other and for what we do as a Bar.

1. Pro Se – Self Serve Center – Over 60% of our litigants in the family court system are pro se. The judges have asked the Bar for help in staffing the self serve center to help unclog the court system. The courts have a tremendous back log in part because of the extra time the pro se litigants require. As a result of the district court judges asking for help, the local attorneys have signed up for over 1000 hours to be available in the Self Serve Center to assist customers in identifying and completing appropriate forms – many more hours than the judges anticipated. This program is just getting off the ground and the judges believe this program will make the courts run more efficiently. Most of the lawyers were recruited through the Bar's Volunteer Lawyer Program. (See Announcement)
2. Judicial Recognition – The local Bar honors the federal judiciary and the state judiciary in alternating years with a special evening that includes a reception, dinner and entertainment. The entire Bar is invited and the venue can accommodate up to 450 people. Our Bar sold out both times and raised over \$40,000 from firms to support this function. The judges are very appreciative and continue to talk about the event long after its occurrence. (See copy of program)
3. The Bar Revue is a wonderful singing group of lawyers and judges that is gaining notoriety. The group sings well known songs but the words have been changed. The new version is often a parody on our legal system. The good natured humor is enjoyed by all.
4. Civil Litigation – This section of over 160 members schedules a lunch meeting with different panels of judges to hear from the judges about whatever is on their mind. This informal luncheon has become extremely popular and is sold out almost immediately every time it is offered. (See Flyer)
5. Continuing Legal Education – CLEs involving the judiciary are always popular programs. The Bar works hard to ensure that the judges have input into the types of CLEs they think are important. Some examples of successful CLE's where the bench and bar have partnered include:
 - A. Our Drug Court is unique here in Mecklenburg and we have worked hard to make sure that funding for this court is available through our legislature. Last year, one of the judges and one of our attorneys worked hand in hand to show how the DWI system works and specifically how the breathalyzer measurements work. Two of our young attorneys volunteered to drink steadily during the morning and the police tested their progress as the morning continued. As you

can imagine, this was educational, entertaining and engaging. The attorneys were able to see first hand how the process works in the court room. (Flyer Available)

- B. Another example involves our Federal Courts which now require electronic filing. Our federal judges recognized how important this process is to our Bar and scheduled several CLEs to make sure our attorneys know exactly how to do this and when to do it. (Flyer Available)
- C. Our Special Committee on Diversity has become one of our most active committees. A subcommittee specifically addresses Diversity on the Bench. Our minority judges have talked to our Bar about what it is like to be a minority judge within the judicial system in general and our Bar in particular. In addition, several of our judges are working together to increase diversity within our Bar.

Two judges are co-chairing the Lunch with a Lawyer program among 8th graders within our public school system. The schools that participated (I think there were over 60) were so eager to do so that we agreed to increase the number of students from one per school to two per school. Even so, we have attorneys on a waiting list who want to participate. We feel certain that the judges' dedication and hands on involvement in this project helped make it a success and a project that many want to be a part of.

A third project undertaken by this committee is a day long conference for area undergraduate college students. It focuses on encouraging minority students' interest in a legal career. Again, minority judges and attorneys participated in the program sharing the many stories of success, hardships and dreams accomplished.

- D. Swearing In Ceremonies - Twice a year, our Bar has a formal ceremony and reception for our new attorneys who have passed the Bar and are being sworn in as members of our Bar. The judges actually hold open sessions of ceremonial court to permit each new admittee to be introduced to the court by a sponsor. This is a popular event for new admittees and their families as well as the bar and the bench. Again, a wonderful way to involve the Bench and the Bar together in celebration of the professions.
- E. Outreach Committee – This committee is identifying Bar and community priorities to ensure that the legal community is aware of and in touch with the needs of the local community. The committee includes judges and attorneys. Projects that are being formed or were formed or are being carried out by this group include - translators for the Latino community working with our Lawyer Referral Service program; the self serve project mentioned earlier; coordinating volunteers to serve schools in need. The Bar receives calls from judges on a regular basis about how they can volunteer for these activities.
- F. Board Meetings – As a regular part of the Mecklenburg County Bar's board agendas, the chief superior court judge, the chief district judge and the federal judge are always invited to the board meeting and included on the agenda to give an update from their perspective. This type of ongoing interaction with the board keeps the judges and the board updated on issues that are important on both sides of the system. Many successful outcomes have occurred because of the close communication between the Bar and the Bench. Examples include:
 - a. Bond Campaign – Lawyers and judges joined forces to campaign for passage of a bond referendum to build a new courthouse; the bar and the bench also served as an oversight committee for the professionals

who designed and built the courthouse. (SEE NEWSPAPER INSERT)
Dedication is scheduled February 9th, 2007 and this courthouse is slated to last for more than century, thanks to the input of lawyers and judges.

- b. Courthouse Security Committee – lawyers, judges and law enforcement establish, implement and enforce rules regarding access to certain areas of the courthouse, including the terms and scope of such access. In addition, this committee determines the level of security to be used as related to lawyers entering and exiting the building, law enforcement's ability to carry weapons beyond a certain point; mobile phones beyond a certain point; and other electronic equipment inside the court building.
- c. Rules of Court – lawyers and judges join together to review rules on a periodic basic and make changes as needed; this group will also draft and implement rules as appropriate for new initiatives in the courts
- d. Legislative interaction – lawyers make contact with their 'friends in the legislature' to advocate for certain needs of the courts and to maintain an adequate level of funding for the courts
- e. Court Funding – Lawyers participate with judges in prioritizing the needs of the system and lobbying the appropriate governmental entity for funding; also, lawyers and judges frequently join forces to speak out with a unified voice on behalf of certain court programs whenever such programs are endangered by a decision of government.

As mentioned earlier, the Bar has over 45 committees and sections that reach out to the attorneys and the judges in many different ways. Our Bar has become more and more intentional about its volunteer activities and announcing the many outreach initiatives that are ongoing. As a result, many judges and attorneys want to participate. This is a wonderful sign of a growing vibrant Bar.

Respectfully submitted,

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