



“From a Different View”

the 100th President of The Mississippi Bar

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This is not the article that was originally drafted to run in this issue of the Mississippi Lawyer. It was a Question & Answer with me, discussing what I foresaw in the upcoming bar year. It was completed just a few days before August 29, 2005. Somehow that article now seems irrelevant. For most Mississippians, especially those of us on the Coast, things are now defined as BK or AK (before/after Katrina). Life is different and our viewpoint is different.

Notice the front cover and the photograph accompanying this article. These were taken just a few weeks before Katrina. The setting for the front cover was the University of Southern Mississippi campus in Long Beach, with the harbor and pier and the beautiful oaks in the background. The harbor and pier are gone and while the oaks remain standing, they are no longer stately and full. They have been ravaged by a force stronger than any of us contemplated. Gone is that gorgeous view. The coastline looks different – strange, yet somewhat familiar.

The photograph accompanying this article was taken at about the same time as the cover. It was shot from Magistrate Roper’s Chambers, looking east over Gulfport from the 8th floor of the Dan M. Russell, Jr. Federal Court Building. I had already picked the caption for the original article, based on this photo – “Justice with a View”. Now it is justice from a different view – gone are many of the trees and

buildings in the background. The building itself must be repaired.

Having witnessed events after the storm, I am more convinced now than ever that lawyers are caring people and ours is a caring profession. Many have volunteered to work the legal assistance desks at the FEMA Disaster Recovery Centers or to take calls on the legal hotline. Thousands of Mississippians were given immediate face to face assistance, with many others helped through telephone assistance. This is a program established through the ABA, whereby the Young Lawyers Division of the Bar in the affected area sets up to assist citizens by volunteering to answer legal questions at the FEMA centers and to establish a legal assistance hotline. We had lawyers at the FEMA sites within days of the storm. Amanda Jones, President of the Young Lawyers Division of the Mississippi Bar, with the assistance of the Bar staff, particularly Melanie Henry, performed a Herculean task getting this program started and coordinating all of the efforts. Amanda basically lived at the Bar Center or was on the Coast for 6-7 weeks. Her firm, Bradley Arant Rose & White, recognized early on that this was a daunting, yet critical, task and told her to focus her attention on it and not to worry about the office – they would get someone else to cover her cases. She did and they did for almost two months. The project will continue assisting Katrina victims until at least the first of next year. Volunteers will

continue to provide legal assistance at most key FEMA sites, with telephone assistance otherwise available. We have had young and not so young, in state and out of state (thanks to the Mississippi Supreme Court’s rule change) attorneys all assisting in this project. Thank you to all the volunteers!

In addition to assisting the public, Mississippi lawyers have stepped forward to help their fellow lawyers. Some have donated money, some furniture, some computers, some clothes; others have physically assisted in salvage and clean up of attorneys’ properties – homes and offices both. At the time this article was scheduled to print, we still did not know how many attorneys suffered losses to their homes and offices; however, we do know that there are approximately 900 attorneys in the three coastal counties most affected and few escaped some damage. Many of us were lucky and had only minor roof damage to our homes, while others were slabbed (a new term I learned – it means only a slab and/or debris remain – no structure is left). Many law offices were damaged, some more severely than others. The solo and small firm practitioners were particularly hit hard.

I was also touched by the outpouring of support from across the nation. We had furniture, computers, and business suits donated. We had numerous Bar associations and law firms across the country

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make contributions to the Mississippi Bar Foundation's Katrina Fund. Much of that money has already been distributed to those attorneys who were most in need. By itself, this won't rebuild a practice, but it is a small start. It is vital to our communities to have our lawyers back on their feet. To that end, the Mississippi Bar established Legal Resource Centers in the three coast counties of Hancock, Harrison, and Jackson. There are computers and printers set up in these centers for use by local attorneys so they can at least do research and download forms.

One of my priorities this year was and is the delivery of legal services to the poor. The two Legal Services agencies in Mississippi were already overwhelmed by the legal needs of our citizens – less than 30 attorneys to serve approximately 543,000 people who qualify for this assistance. Katrina has made this an even more critical issue. Volunteers are needed for the short term – for staffing FEMA centers and answering telephones but they are also

needed for the long haul. Mississippi Volunteer Lawyers Program serves as a way for each of you to accomplish this long term goal. I believe that those lawyers who came to work at the FEMA Disaster Recovery Centers or took calls

“I believe that those lawyers who came to work at the FEMA Disaster Recovery Centers or took calls from Katrina victims saw things from a different view than they ever did before.”

from Katrina victims saw things from a different view than they ever did before. They saw how people are taken advantage of when they don't know their rights, how hard it is for most people to work through

the maze of FEMA lines, nevertheless a judicial process. Post Katrina we have clearly shown what a caring profession we are – let's not forget that the need is ongoing.

As I said at the beginning of the article, this is not what I originally wrote for the magazine, but my view of things has changed. I hope I won't take electricity, water, telephones, etc. for granted again – but I probably will. The one thing I can be sure of is that the Coast will rebuild and lawyers are a critical part of that rebuilding process.

From all of us who reside on the Coast – thank you for your prayers and support.

On a final note, I want to remind everyone that the first 100 years of the Bar is about to come to an end – January 25, 2006 marks that anniversary. You will soon be hearing more about the plans and projects of The Mississippi Bar and the Centennial Committee. Here is to another 100 years of service to the profession by The Mississippi Bar. ■



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