



Reflections on Katrina

In my previous article, I focused on the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. Unfortunately, the topic of Katrina is still relevant for most of us and will be for a long time. While the storm is over and cleanup is progressing, the process of rebuilding is just beginning. The rebuilding is not just the physical act of putting up new buildings or repairing old ones – it is a spiritual and emotional one as well. Many lives, as well as homes and offices, have been impacted. All the stories you heard about people swimming out of their homes, escaping on boats/rafts when the water rose in their houses – they are true. Some attorneys who had these experiences find release in telling their story. Other attorneys cannot talk about their experiences – it is too difficult and emotionally trying. Some stories are told with a sense of humor – “I don’t have to worry about what clothes to wear tomorrow” or “I have been intending to sort through old papers/files – the job will go a lot faster now.” I have heard attorneys joking and comparing their FEMA trailers. There are other stories, told matter-of-factly, like the solo practitioner who said he had not seen a single paying client since the storm and was unable to bill any old matters because he could not close them yet. Months with no income and none in sight. Even without physical damage to a home or office, I am not sure how you cope with such a loss.

I am confident the Coast will rebuild and I am just as confident that lawyers are critical to the rebuilding process. Lawyers have to be able to get back to work to assist in that effort. To that end, The Mississippi Bar has coordinated fundraising efforts, in addition to serving as a clearinghouse for donations of computers, furniture and even business suits.

The Board of Bar Commissioners voted to fund the establishment of business resource centers for attorneys in the three hardest hit counties. Four sites were equipped with computers, printers and internet capability. The local bar associations in those counties helped coordinate the location sites and are assisting in their maintenance. The Mississippi Bar, through the Lawyers and Judges Assistance Program, has arranged to make counseling available, even by telephone where necessary. In conjunction with the Harrison County Bar Association and the Russell Walker Blass Chapter of the American Inns of Court, The Mississippi Bar offered a free, one-day seminar in Gulfport on Saturday, October 8, entitled “Rebuilding Your Practice After Katrina.” We had approximately 80 Mississippi lawyers in attendance with most staying the entire day. Attendees included trial attorneys, defense attorneys, and general practice attorneys alike. We had numerous comments that this was the best seminar the Bar had ever offered. It covered technology issues, malpractice, document recovery/retrieval and other relevant topics. Most of the speakers were from out of state and did this free of charge and on their own time.

I hesitate to try and name the individuals and businesses that have contributed to the various efforts, because I am sure I will forget someone, but the generosity of individuals, law firms, other bar associations, and businesses, here in Mississippi and throughout the country, has been wonderful. Unfortunately, even this will only go so far given the number of attorneys affected. A few of us on the Coast are fortunate enough to have regular paychecks,

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*Joy Lambert Phillips
President of The Mississippi Bar
2005-2006*

“While the storm is over and cleanup is progressing, the process of rebuilding is just beginning.”

President's Message continued...

a few are financially secure otherwise, others will soon start to bill large businesses again, and thus slowly replenish their cash flow; however, most solo and small firm practitioners have lost all or most of their client base. It will be a long hard process for them to rebuild. Their individual clients have left town, lost jobs, and lost homes. Their small business clients have suffered damage or gone out of business. Bills for legal work performed before the storm may now go unpaid because of these same reasons. Without solo and small firm practitioners, many legal needs of the community would go unmet. Therefore, after considering all of the factors, The Mississippi Bar and Mississippi Bar Foundation decided to concentrate the majority of the assistance efforts in the direction of the solo and small firms. Even then, the needs far outweigh the resources.

If you have already donated to the Mississippi Bar Foundation's Katrina

Relief Fund, thank you so much. If you have not, I encourage you to do so – it is not too late and every little bit does help. Some may prefer to provide direct assistance to a particular attorney. If you do not personally know anyone who needs assistance, call me, and I can give you several names. It can be as simple as sending her/him a gift card to an office supply store. Whatever you do – just do it – do not let your good intentions slip by. One last point on this – the Coast, its lawyers and its citizens will need your thoughts and prayers for a long time to come. While you are at it, please include the Louisiana Bar in your thoughts and prayers. Almost half of the attorneys in their state - 8,000 - were affected in some way by either Hurricane Katrina or Hurricane Rita.

I know that my first column did not contain the typical description of what was planned for the year or a discussion of the various committees and their projects.

Nevertheless, I do want to point out the fact that we have great committee members and chairs who are continuing their planned projects, despite delays and disruptions. I also failed to say “thank you” in my first article. Please let me do that now. It is truly an honor and privilege to be President of The Mississippi Bar. I never imagined I would have the opportunity to serve in this capacity, nevertheless be the 100th President of The Mississippi Bar (remember, January 25, 2006, is our 100 year anniversary), as well as the first woman and the first in-house corporate counsel (at least as far as we can determine) to be given that privilege in Mississippi. I also want to belatedly express my appreciation to Charlie Swayze for his leadership last year. We owe Charlie, his law firm, and his family a genuine thank you for the time he dedicated to this office last year. One of the highlights of my year as President-Elect was getting to know Charlie and his wife, Jo Claire.

Finally, a few more belated “thank you’s” are in order. Thank you to the chairs and members of the various committees and sections of The Mississippi Bar. This is the heart of the Bar and where most of the work is done on behalf of the Bar. The Bar is only as strong as its members and I urge you to become involved. I also want to thank Hancock Bank and the other members of its Legal Department. Without their support, I could not serve in this capacity. Speaking of support, I want to also thank my family, particularly, my long suffering husband, Frank, for always being there for me.

Larry Houchins and his entire staff at the Mississippi Bar Center deserve the thanks of all of us. They are all outstanding professionals. After having dealt with other Bar Associations throughout the country, I am convinced that we have the best. It is amazing the array of services The Mississippi Bar provides to our membership with such a small staff, especially during these post storm days. I look forward to working with each of them this year and serving you as your 100th Bar President. I thank you for this honor and I assure you I will strive to be responsive to the members of The Mississippi Bar. ■

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