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President's Column

Steve Leben

By the time you read this, Eileen Olds will have been busy working as the American Judges Association's president for some time. That means two things for me. First, I'll no longer be on the treadmill-like travel schedule that accompanies that office. Second, I'll be back at work as the editor of *Court Review*, getting its publication schedule back on track.

But before relinquishing this space, allow me a few moments to talk about the AJA and its work over the past year.

Like most professional associations, our potential is hindered a bit by the one-year term of our leaders. My wife heads up the medical staff at a large hospital in Kansas City; they revised their leadership structure in the past two years so that the president of their staff could serve more than a year, thus better enabling long-term thinking and long-term projects. In the one-year term, a person starts to get the hang of the job and its possibilities right about the time it's over.

For AJA, though, I'm not sure there's a better way, and most professional organizations—from the smallest to even very large ones like the American Bar Association—work this way. In this system, the AJA can best move forward when we continually build from year to year on the progress made in previous years.

My service as AJA president was made so much easier because of the excellent leadership we had for several years before me. Terry Elliott worked hard to make sure that we addressed matters of substance. Mike McAdam organized a stunning national conference that included production of a one-hour PBS program on judicial independence. Gayle Nachtigal insisted that we focus on providing a true voice for judges in general. Mike Cicconetti worked to maintain the AJA as a go-to leader for judges. And a great many others, including former presidents, members of our Board of Governors and committees, and our friends at the National Center for State Courts, have helped to build the platform from which we are able to do matters of importance to judges.

From this platform, together we have done a lot in the past year:

- AJA issued its first "white paper," urging actions that will improve both actual and perceived procedural fairness in the courts. The paper was presented at our national conference in Vancouver, and further action on the recommendations contained in the paper should be expected.
- AJA obtained trademark protection for its role as the Voice of the Judiciary.® We had begun using this mark under Gayle Nachtigal's leadership, both as a testament to our actions and as an aspirational goal for our future. When another organization copied the mark, we registered it. We sought throughout the year to live up to that role.
- AJA issued a statement of support for a much-needed pay raise for New York state judges. These judges have not received a pay raise in 9 years—and have only received two raises in the past 20 years. Our statement received some coverage in New York, where we have nearly 150 members. But whether it received coverage or not, it was important for an organization that calls itself the Voice of the Judiciary to speak on a matter of this importance.
- AJA joined an amicus brief defending from constitutional attack the North Carolina law providing public financing for judicial elections. The brief was in *Duke v. Leake*, scheduled for oral argument in the United States Court of Appeals for the Fourth Circuit in December 2007; the brief emphasized the need for a judiciary that the public could respect as impartial.
- AJA's annual meeting was highlighted by a joint appearance by Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg of the United States Supreme Court and Justice William Ian Corneil Binnie of the Supreme Court of Canada.
- AJA adopted a formal resolution supporting appropriate increases to mandatory judicial-retirement ages.
- AJA joined several other organizations in actively opposing the 2006 ballot proposal in Colorado under which appellate judges would have faced term limits, a proposal that was defeated at the polls 57% to 43% in November 2006.
- As AJA president, I took the opportunity to place newspaper op-ed pieces on appropriate subjects. An op-ed piece in the *National Law Journal* advocated real reforms to improve the judiciary, rather than the sort of ballot measures proposed in Colorado and South Dakota in 2006; the suggested reforms included appropriate and transparent judicial-performance evaluations, and the use of social-science research to improve court functions. An op-ed in the *Providence Journal* pointed out how judges decide cases on their merits, not on political grounds. I also participated in a debate before the American College of Trial Lawyers against the proponents of the South Dakota Jail-4-Judges initiative regarding appropriate reform of the court system.

From this base, the AJA will continue to move forward under the guidance of Eileen Olds and her leadership team in the coming year. I want to thank all of you who have helped the AJA and me during the past year. I also hope that you will come to our next educational conference—September 7 to 12, 2008—at the Westin Maui in Hawaii. Trust me when I say: You couldn't have a more beautiful and relaxing conference site. See you there.