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President's Column

Eileen Olds

I can never say enough what an honor and a privilege it is to have been elected to serve as your 46th president of the American Judges Association. I have used that time since our annual conference in Vancouver to crystallize my vision of what I would like to accomplish during my tenure and of what I believe we can accomplish together. The potential to see dreams realized is what keeps us going! Like many of you, I have concluded that judges in general—and the members of AJA in particular—must seize the opportunity to improve our delivery of services within the justice system and to address the continuing concerns that we as judges have.

When I joined AJA in 1995, I never envisioned leading this most important and distinguished body of judges from all states and provinces, from different levels and jurisdictions, and from courts with varying subject matters. What I now know for sure is that wherever we sit, we have many commonalities that bind us.

When I first became a member, none of the following—cyber-crimes, security concerns, election reform, multilingual litigants, caseflow management, court technology, domestic-violence protective orders—were at the forefront. Drug courts and a host of other specialty and problem-solving courts were rare. How things have changed in just 12 short years! One of the most significant benefits of AJA to me has been the exposure to the best practices and educational programs on all of these subjects as they were emerging.

Thanks to the efforts of our immediate past president, Steve Leben, we were successful in trademarking the phrase that for years has defined AJA, the Voice of the Judiciary.® I am proud to be at the helm when we will have a voice that is louder than ever. As the Voice of the Judiciary, AJA is poised to meet unprecedented challenges. We must be prepared to rise to the occasion whenever topics of importance to the judiciary arise.

I realize that I have taken office at a time when access to the ideals of justice are often called into question. Whether it is the debate regarding the crack cocaine–powder disparities in sentencing or the Jena 6 movement, or the overrepresentation of minorities in the criminal-justice system, access-to-justice issues abound. I can assure you that I am personally invested in involving our membership in a critical examination of such topics. Our education committee, led by Judge Elliott Zide of Massachusetts and Judge Mary Celeste of Colorado, is mindful of the need for continuing education in these areas.

Self-representation by litigants is at an all-time high, and this complicates access issues even more. The risk for inefficiencies, as well as many unintended consequences, are expensive and time consuming for the court system. It is the pro se litigant who most often confuses procedural fairness with perceived fairness. I am also convinced that we can do more to educate the public about our roles, authority, and limitations as judges. My "Tell It to the Judge" initiative is designed to open the dialogue between stakeholders in the judicial system and the public. It is more than fitting since we live during a time in history where there is raging debate over the role of judges in our society.

Like you, I have seen a progressive influx of mentally ill persons in our courtrooms. In Virginia alone, 15% of jail and prison inmates have a serious mental illness, and 43% percent of juveniles in detention are diagnosed with mental and emotional disorders. Virginia's experience is typical. We judges must examine responsible and necessary steps to deal with this: the potential for criminalization of mental illness is something we cannot afford to ignore. For this reason, I have appointed an ad hoc committee to address these concerns. Judges Belinda Hill of Texas and Judge Lynda Howell of Arizona will co-chair this committee.

For all of us, ensuring access and fairness and strengthening and preserving the independence of the judiciary must remain priorities. We as AJA members are bound together, not just by our friendships, but also by a mutual dedication to these concepts.

The beginning of a new year is a time for all of us to reflect on our successes and disappointments of the past and to focus on our hopes for the future. It is the same with the AJA. 2007 brought with it many successful firsts including the first AJA white paper, thanks to Judge Kevin Burke of Minnesota and Judge Steve Leben of Kansas. I am hopeful in this organizational year that we will see many firsts as well, including the "Tell It to the Judge" programs and the committee on issues of mental health in criminal justice.

Equal access to all who come before us, and independence to carry out our duties in our courtrooms, faithfully and impartially, are pillars of our judiciary. I greet 2008 with optimism as we continue to serve the nation's judges and the public by elevating all that is good about our profession!