

## HOW THE ABA HELPED MY PRACTICE

Does participation in the American Bar Association really improve your law practice? You already know that the benefit received from any association, even the ABA, depends on what you put into that organization. Plenty of us have been passive members, just sitting back, paying the dues, getting a couple of nice, glossy magazines in return, and believing that we've done our part to love, protect, and honor the profession of law. Although that's enough, and although the ABA certainly relies on members like that, it does welcome those lawyers who want to become active and make a difference.

Seduced by the prospect of free membership and an interesting magazine, I joined up with the ABA while I was in law school. A few years into my practice, I became involved with the Washington State Young Lawyers Division CLE Committee. Why? Someone asked me, and I had nothing better to do.

Before long, I started attending ABA meetings, just to gather up needed CLE hours and enjoy shrimp-filled receptions in interesting cities not my own. I met other lawyers from across the country whom I'd only see once a year, but even that created a referral base I wouldn't have had otherwise. Back in 1994, the General Practice Section's Spring Meeting in London became my first GP meeting, and the friendly, engaging nature of both the leaders and the rank-and-file attendees was enticing. But I still generally limited my participation to attending the ABA Annual Meeting.

2001 came along, and I was involved in the General Practice, Solo and Small Firm Section's Bankruptcy Committee. The next thing I knew, my program proposal had been approved for the Annual Meeting. I was more than shocked because I had never submitted a proposal. Someone had volunteered me.

Around that time I got a bee in my bonnet about the attorney liability provisions in the proposed Bankruptcy Reform Act. I became involved with other bankruptcy committees within the ABA, taking an active role at a time when Congress wanted to change the Bankruptcy Code. On a roll, I joined the ABA's lobbying efforts, even suggesting legislation and getting my own amendment introduced in the Senate. The attorney liability provisions of the new legislation were important to me, and I wanted to do something about them. We were responsible for one of the pro-debtor changes in the bill. The Shall to May change in § 707(b) came about as a result of our efforts. I found myself appointed to the Task Force on Attorney Discipline, which produced a report and a working paper, both of which have been cited in court. I chaired a task force that filed an amicus brief with the U.S. Supreme Court. The GPSolo Division published my book.

What has this meant to my practice? My involvement in the ABA has raised my professional profile. It has allowed me access to the leaders in the profession. It has allowed me to participate in actual policy making. Bar activities have given me a national presence and have given me much greater credibility with other attorneys and the court. Mark Zuckerberg may have shrunk six degrees of separation down to only four through Facebook, but the ABA did it earlier and with a lot more credibility, putting many of its active participants at only two degrees of separation.

When I walked into a meeting in Nashville in 2005, the people there were leaders of the profession and they all knew each other. They drafted the policies and, all of a sudden, I was there as an equal. I am now interacting at the highest levels with people who wouldn't know my name if I hadn't been in the ABA. People I see on TV take and return my calls.

Involvement in the ABA became an equalizer, allowing me, a lawyer who practices out of a converted house, to sit down at the table with lawyers in megafirms, members of Congress, movers and shakers--not the kind of lawyers I usually hang with in Seattle. The ABA has brought diversity into my practice, and I'm not talking diversity based on ancestry or some other ABA criteria. It's given me contact with and connections to lawyers who practice in different specialties, different settings, and different states. Believe me, there is a whale of a difference between a lawyer practicing bankruptcy law in Ballard, Washington, and one practicing securities law in New York City, even if we are the same gender, religion, and race.

Can I say that my ABA involvement has directly produced a specific client or fee? Possibly, but probably not. What I can say is that involvement with the ABA can bring a higher level of practice and more connections and "networking" opportunities. Most of us went to law school with the expectation that we could change the world. To do that you need a lever, and the ABA can be your lever.

## Footnotes

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