

PRESIDENT'S PERSPECTIVE

Necessity is the Mother of Invention

By Michael J. Danni

Here at the CCBA we are giving you our all. This is how it has been for a long time. For 139 years.

This is the last article I get to write as President of the Camden County Bar Association. My heart is heavy for the loss of so many New Jerseyans to the Coronavirus. I cannot say enough about the sacrifice of first responders, nurses, doctors, food service workers, and essential workers who face this virus as I am able to sit and write this article. It is hard to brag about our year at the Bar Association when so many people are sick, out of work, and who face almost insurmountable challenges in the face of this tragedy. The grief can paralyze you.

I write this article with bad news about the end of the Bar Association. At the Bar Association we have faced something that has never been seen in our lifetimes. We had a choice to make last month. So we made the decision to basically close up shop and do nothing for a few months. We would not do any CLE presentations, we would not reach out to our members and help them. We could not figure out how to stay relevant and to continue to give back to our members. We had a good 139-year run at the CCBA, so it was just time to move on and let the attorneys in Camden County go without a voice. We were sad that we would no longer be able to hold events and raise money for veterans, for low income and disabled children, no longer provide scholarships for high school and law students. We would stop interacting with the Courts. We figured that it was time to pack it in, and we figured everyone would understand.

In the spirit of a movie we all know and love – *Clue* – “That is how it could have happened” at the Bar Association. We faced something that has never been seen in our lifetimes and we had a choice to make: either sit and let this consume us or use it to redefine ourselves. Do you want to know what really happened? I’ll tell you; but before I get there...

Let’s go back to June of 2019. In the spirit of the great Presidents before me, I was sworn in as the 93rd President of the CCBA. We had an awesome night and raised more money for our Bar Foundation that had been raised in 10 years. That is a testament to all the people who appreciate our Bar and want to see us succeed because of the good things we do. A spirited night, filled with friends and a couple lawyer shark jokes, and we started the year. And what a year it has been!

Thank you to our staff – Kara Edens, Roscane Riley and Krystal Widman. Kara steered the ship and is close to her second full year with us as the Executive Director. We focused our year on trimming costs and examining our budget and spending, growing our CLE base and providing more seminars, and most importantly, showing the public the value that lawyers provide to society. Through several initiatives we were able to significantly increase revenue while at the same time decreasing costs and spending.

Thank you to my executive board: Michelle Badolato (incoming President), Dawnn Briddell, Rachael Brekke and Craig Becker. Thank you to my Board of Trustees. We have grown together so much over these past 10 years. You have all given so much of your time and I tell you all the time how much I appreciate it. This Association would be nothing without this Board.

Thank you to my wife and family for allowing me to spend my time outside of the house at all of these events. Thank you to my employer Vincent Ciecka for allowing me to be able to work and also give back to the Bar as President. Thank you to my wonderful administrative professional Renee Piermatteo. She is a wonderful person who has the ill fortune of me asking for her help. I want to thank my mother and father and sisters for being there for me. My father and I worked together for 14 years until his recent retirement and we loved our time together. My mother is a saint for many reasons, but also for helping to guide me towards the right path.

There are many people who went before me who I learned from. Past CCBA Presidents Ron Lieberman, Eric Fikry, Brenda Eutsler, Casey Price, Jen Fowler, Lou Moffa, Gary Boguski, and many others, have taught me so much. Thank you to Larry Pelletier and our past employees. I hope I was able to channel that education into my vigor for the Bar Association. I learned to be patient, to listen, to think outside the box, to not be afraid to act, to be smart and when to stay quiet. Most of all, I learned how much I loved being a part of such a great organization. It was not long ago that I was able to be Chair of the Young Lawyers Committee, and the young lawyers are right here with me in this presidency. We are all on the same level. The label is just a label. It is important, but you cannot get caught up in labels. My young lawyers are the best in the state and I am proud to be a part of them still (even though I technically aged out 5 years ago). Our Young Lawyer Trustee Chris Keating is a star and you’ll be hearing his name in the future, no doubt.

Thank you to the Bar Foundation Board of Trustees and especially to Judge Holden, our Foundation President, for leading the charge. I have great respect and admiration for him, and I just love his demeanor and common-sense approach to life.

The past year has been quite busy. Countless events meant countless opportunities to show off our Bar Association. I was able to speak at a Naturalization Ceremony at the Court, to the incoming and outgoing clerks of the Camden County Superior Court Judges, at the new lawyer swearing in and oath, and at the Opening of Court and Memorial Service. Each time was special for separate reasons. Suffice it to say that the Judges, law clerks and staff at our Camden County Superior Court are top notch and they put their hearts into every day and every case. I was able to help guide the CCBA as a liaison between the Bench and Bar. We planned, and it will be starting this year, a Reduced Fee

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City of Camden, NJ 08102

Lawyer Referral Program. This program is going to start with having reduced fees in certain cases for Municipal Court representation and we hope to expand it to other areas, thereby giving pro se clients an opportunity to afford a lawyer. We provided over 40 CLE seminars and webinars this year. We created new committees and strengthened existing committees. We now have an Active Lawyers Committee, a Committee of Sages, and a Professional Development Committee. We are working to reignite our wisest lawyers and bring them more into the fold. We have been networking all year. Spirited events included Meet the Judges, Fall Frolic, Holiday Party, Devine Award, Gerry Award, Autumn Scramble golf outing, and more.

Before this pandemic stopped us all in our tracks, we were planning for Michelle Badolato's Installation Dinner. We had the Camden free legal advice clinic coming up, and we were rolling out the reduced fee lawyer referral program. Kara and Michelle were about to leave for Chicago for the yearly American Bar Institute's Bar Leadership Institute where they would bond and learn how to better serve the Bar. (I went with Larry Pelletier a couple years ago and it was awesome.) Then the news started coming more and more about the virus. We knew something was coming. Something that was bigger than us. So, now let's talk about our reaction.

We know what could have happened. As I write this on April 27, 2020, we are a month and a half into the shutdown. All the great things I mention in the preceding paragraphs were in question. Monthly meetings were not enough. Standing around was not enough.

We immediately put a plan into place for staff to work remotely so we wouldn't miss a beat. We started video conferencing and quickly

learned Zoom. The CCBA had been planning to start webinars at some point, but we had never done a webinar and were not set up for it. We immediately transformed our robust CLE set list into all webinars, and added brand new webinars at reduced prices. We made the monetary outlay to allow us to provide virtual PA credits. We will soon be saving our webinars to our website and offering them on demand for purchase. We are now offering Bar Association ID cards FREE (\$25 value) to renewing members. We are offering one FREE practice listing (\$50 value) in our member directory. We provided dues discounts for electronic renewals and early payments. We proactively reached out to our members to tell you about these new benefits. And again, we KEPT THE COST OF MEMBERSHIP AT A MAXIMUM OF \$180 a year! That is half the cost of many bar memberships.

As an executive board we have met weekly on Zoom calls, many lasting 2 hours. We had to make the difficult decision to furlough one of our valued employees, Krystal Widman. We thank Krystal for all she has done for our CCBA and CCBF and we hope to be able to bring her back on board when this is over. We did not make any decisions lightly.

The good news: We have fully transferred to all webinars instead of in-person seminars for the foreseeable future. We received a grant from the NJSBA so we could continue our high school scholarship work through the Foundation. Also on the horizon are listservs and other networking and communication opportunities for our members. As part of your renewal we are asking all members to complete a brief survey so we can learn more about you and better serve you. We want

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to know what type of law our members practice so we can get better with networking and referral groupings. This virus has, among other things, forced us to sharpen our focus.

Like in *Clue*, you, the member, now have control. Our dues are the main mechanism that allows us to remain in business. Our revenue is derived primarily by dues, with CLEs, dinners and events a close second. We know that unfortunately we will not be having dinners or events in the near future. We had to cancel multiple networking and fundraising events this spring. These events will be back only if we are back. Our members, first and foremost by paying dues, drive our organization. The Board of Trustees spends hours to determine how to best help our members and give them the tools they need to succeed. We know how important the Bar Association is to so many and we strive to do better.

What can you do to help? Pay your dues now. Members renewing before May 31 will receive a discount. If everyone pays their dues, we will be able to weather this storm and continue to give back to our community, hold CLE seminars, networking and fundraising events, and continue to be a voice for you as a member and a lawyer.

We are fortunate. We were fortunate before the virus hit. Many of us – most of us – are still employed and are doing better than most people. We are not on the front lines, exposed. We need to continue to help where we can. Do you want to come out of this and say, "I saved a few bucks on membership?" Or do you want to look back and remember how you helped your Bar Association survive and thrive? We are here for you and will be here for you, so long as you are here for us, now.

I have complete confidence in our incoming President Michelle Badolato along with our new slate of trustees: Dawnn Briddell, President-elect; Rachael B. Brekke, Vice President; Craig D. Becker, Treasurer; Matthew T. Rooney, Secretary; Trustees: Michelle Altieri, Kevin M. Costello, Edward P. Epstein, Amir Goodarzi-Panah, Brian K. Herman, Jeanette Kwon, Scott J. Levine; and Young Lawyer Trustee Carly K. Ferro. Michelle is about as cool as a cucumber. Her even keel demeanor will suit our CCBA well. Michelle does not get shaken and is also a long-time trustee and former Young Lawyer chair. Our executive board continues to be replenished with fine talent. We bring on our seasoned trustee and former Young Lawyer chair Matt Rooney as Secretary of our Bar. Our existing officers exceeded expectations and I know that our pond is well stocked with more talent than the 2018 Golden State Warriors.

The Bar Association's best days are ahead of us. Soon enough we will have overcome this virus and its challenges, and we will be back at in-person events. A year from now we will be planning a move to a new Bar Headquarters to further save money and be ready for the next challenge we face. We, as lawyers, are ready for challenges. We think outside the box and solve problems. We do not give up. We will get stronger because of this, I promise. We will be here for you, like we always have been. In another year I will be the President of the Camden County Bar Foundation and I will be reporting back to you on how far we have come in a year.

With that I say thank you to all of you, the members, for being there this year and coming to our events. With your support of our webinars and by renewing your membership, you can ensure the continuance of the Camden County Bar Association. We will get through this together and come out stronger than ever.

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