

A Vision of the Future

Based on an interview of Judge Arthur W. Sinclair conducted by Alissa N. Hudson in July 1999

Arthur W. Sinclair received his license to practice law in 1939, served in the JAG Corps during World War II, went into private practice in 1946 and on the Circuit Court bench in 1950. He is also the last living founding member of the Prince William County Bar Association. In the early days of his time on the bench, the circuit comprised three counties, Fairfax, Arlington and Prince William, with the majority of his work taking place in Fairfax. He is highly regarded by many of the attorneys who practice here in Prince William County, Manassas, and Manassas Park. Although Judge Sinclair is officially retired, he now serves as a substitute judge throughout the Commonwealth, and maintains a busy schedule, often still working a full work week.

Though I tried to encourage recollections of the legal community from days past, it was clear the Judge Sinclair wanted to talk about the future. He has definite goals in mind for the Prince William County Bar Association and was ready to share them with us. First, he said we should encourage attendance at our meetings. "We've got to get all of them there to be part of it." We should encourage member attorneys to have a voice, knowing that we will get conflicting voices, but also knowing that "out of that, good things come." We should also encourage professional development through service, by promoting active participation on committees both locally and at the state level.

Second, Sinclair is concerned about maintaining the balance of power between the legislature and the judiciary. One issue of particular concern to him is the potential for a move towards elected judges vs. appointed judges, a move... "that will greatly politicize the whole process. You cannot run for office and ask someone to support you and not feel beholden to them." There is much criticism of judges and attorneys and Sinclair feels it is up to the local bar associations to actively protect their reputations and those of the judges with whom they administer the law. Local Bar Associations should work together to send clear messages to their legislators in Richmond on issues of importance to them. One way to do this is through the effective use of carefully worded resolutions.

Another goal judge Sinclair suggested for the local bar is to facilitate open communication between the judges and attorneys. One way to accomplish this is by encouraging greater attendance, by the judiciary, at all bar functions. Monthly General meetings, annual social functions, periodic community outreach projects, these all provide opportunities to exchange ideas in a non-working environment, and help to promote a spirit of mutual support. We could also follow the example set by other local bars and reintroduce the practice of periodic meetings between judges and attorneys, to discuss how the process in the courts is working --- or not working--- and develop changes as appropriate.

Lastly though, Sinclair did not initially proffer the idea of working with other professional communities in the area he was quick to affirm it, and to make suggestions of groups to collaborate with for the purpose of sponsoring large community outreach programs. The improved cross- professional communications that will result from such efforts benefit all parties involved.

After spending an hour with Judge Sinclair, it is easy to see why the PWC Bar Association honors one of its members each year with a professionalism award named in Sinclair's honor. The same qualities of integrity competence and professionalism that we recognize in Judge Sinclair, the local bar seeks to encourage on an individual level, through annual recognition. It is clear that Sinclair is encouraging the Prince William County Bar Association to reach for the same ideals, for the benefit of all the judges and attorneys who practice here.