

## ATLA HOSTS PANEL ON STARTING A LAW PRACTICE

ATLA hosted a panel presentation on the topic of starting a law practice on March 16 in the trial courtroom. Participating were three practicing attorneys: J. Franklin Long (Bluefield, West Virginia), B.L. Conway (Abingdon, Virginia), and Janie Lindamood (Johnson City, Tennessee), along with ASL's Career Services Director, Kirsten ButleRitchie.

Mr. Conway started the evening with the "story" of his practice. Mr. Conway told students how he came to start his practice in Abingdon. After graduating from the University of Kentucky, he took a position with a large defense firm. Mr. Conway said that this experience was great training; however, he began to feel like a "slave to the billable hour." Mr. Conway remembers being seen as a "maverick" and eventually resigned in order to open his own practice.

Mr. Conway's first step towards opening his practice was to obtain a line of credit from a local bank. He then rented an office from another lawyer in Abingdon who became a mentor to him. Mr. Conway stressed the importance of learning from attorneys with experience. He also encouraged students to develop a good reputation early on. Mr. Conway emphasized that everyday is an opportunity to meet influential people in your community and get your name out there. He found that getting out in the legal community and making contact with older members of the local bar was key. Currently, Mr. Conway's firm has grown to include a support staff of eight. They maintain over 200 open case files. He said that maintaining high standards and rewarding his staff has helped him create a successful practice.

Mr. Long began his talk with a comparison of himself to a bumblebee. He said that like the bumblebee, he "didn't realize what he shouldn't be able to accomplish." Mr. Long told students that a bumblebee, although proportionately too heavy for its tiny wings to lift, flies anyway. Mr. Long called this phenomenon "intelligent ignorance." He had three definite job offers when he graduated from law school; however, he decided to try a solo practice. Mr. Long shared office space with an older lawyer who had quite a different philosophy from his own. Mr. Long's philosophy was an "it-takes-money-to-make-money approach" while his colleague's was "a penny saved is a penny earned." Mr. Long said he tried to be polite and get along, but after nine months he was ready to move out on his own. He happened upon a chance to buy a building, so he did. Mr. Long encouraged students to understand that they could do these kinds of things if they put their minds to it. He ended his talk by explaining the importance of the desire to help others. He said, "when you do quality work, you will make money." He also said that his former officemate taught him to apply the highest of standards whether the case is worth twenty-five dollars or twenty-five hundred dollars to you personally and never to become obsessed with the financial merits of a case. Mr. Long ended by telling students, "if the mind can conceive and believe, it can achieve."

Mrs. ButleRitchie shared her experiences in Oregon with the audience. She had always wanted to be an adoption attorney, but had a change of plans when she moved across the

country. At first, Mrs. ButleRitchie worked as a secretary for a large firm. This position enabled her to meet many people in the local bar. She left that firm to begin her own practice, which turned a profit in only three months. Mrs. ButleRitchie told students that she developed a client base by volunteering for the local legal aid society. Mrs. ButleRitchie said that what most people don't realize is that it is very difficult to qualify for legal aid. Many of those who didn't qualify hired her to represent them. She stressed the importance of having clients "stick to payment plans." She also said that since she practiced out of her home, setting boundaries for when clients could call or come by was of utmost importance. She also said that by maintaining a professional relationship with other attorneys she got many new clients through referrals. Mrs. ButleRitchie's final point was that an attorney's written work product builds his or her reputation.

Ms. Lindamood practices primarily in juvenile court. She attended law school after raising her own children and after becoming the grandmother of seven. She said that "everyone wanted her to fit into an image of what an attorney should be," but she always remained true to herself. Mrs. Lindamood told students that the key to her success is her attitude. She said that she often has to represent people that she doesn't even personally like, but that she believes she should always give her all for her clients. Mrs. Lindamood told students to "believe what they are trying to convince others to believe."

The presentations were followed by a short question and answer period. One student asked the panel, "How do we find out what sort of malpractice insurance we need?" Mr. Long suggested contacting a member of the local bar to ask where he or she has her coverage. He also said to contact the state bar.

Another student asked, "What do I actually need to open my office?" Mr. Long suggested putting as little money in as possible. He remained on his "law school budget" for the first two years. He had put together a budget before the presentation and shared it with the group:

Computer	\$1500
Multi-line Phone	\$ 200
Furniture	\$3000
Office Supplies	\$1000
Fax Machine	\$ 300
Copier (used)	\$1500
Internet (6 months)	\$ 100
Rent (6 months)	\$3000
Miscellaneous	<u>\$2400</u>
Total	\$12,000

Kirsten ButleRitchie responded to a question about what an attorney needs for a home office. She said that if a law library is near, computer research isn't necessary. She suggested using the same computer and desk as in law school, buying a good printer to

make your own letterhead and business cards and having a separate phone line put in. The only other expense, she said, would be a couple of extra chairs for clients.

Each of the panelists encouraged students to be advocates for their clients. In describing their experiences in developing their practices, it was clear that each had taken a different approach to building a successful solo practice. Although their methods were different; each attorney built a reputation based on the desire to help others to the best of his or her ability and a strong belief in him or herself.