

## *Forget the Lawyer Jokes – New Jersey Needs Your Skills and Leadership*

**Rayman L. Solomon and Charles J. Hollenbeck**

Over the past decade the Commission on Professionalism in the Law has had the pleasure of joining with bar associations to present Professional Lawyer of the Year awards to talented and dedicated lawyers. The criteria for the award is straightforward—the person chosen must be someone of outstanding character and recognized competence who is committed to the highest ideals of the profession. The award winners comprise a diverse group in terms of age, racial composition and ethnicity. They have come from every county in New Jersey and they represent a broad array of practice areas. Some are solo practitioners, others partners in the largest law firms. Government lawyers and corporate counsel are well represented on the roster of winners, which currently boasts over 250 names.

Every year we are impressed by the quality of the Professional Lawyer of the Year award winners. They are outstanding lawyers, and special people. But, what is it that makes them so? Of course, they all met the criteria established for the award. But, what specific qualities have contributed to their success and stellar reputation?

A glimpse at the accomplishments and backgrounds of the award winners reveal that they share a common trait – they are committed to “giving back” to the profession and the community. In 2006 and 2007 the commission presented awards to 58 lawyers. All of them stepped beyond the confines of law practice to become engaged in serving on committees, boards and other entities within and outside the legal community. Their activities include membership on district ethics committees, teaching at colleges and law schools, and assuming leadership positions in community organizations as varied as chambers of commerce, regional dance companies, historical societies and youth athletic groups. Some have held elective office, or been involved in local and state politics. Many have served as bar association leaders at the local, state, and national levels, or have helped to build inns of court. Others have served the judiciary as judges or members of Supreme Court appointed committees. And, like many lawyers across the state, our award winners have not hesitated to perform *pro bono* legal services for those in need.

What has become clear to the Commission on Professionalism in the Law is that the term “professionalism” encompasses much more than just an ability to produce a cogent brief, or acting civilly during a court appearance. Being a true professional of course includes being a competent practitioner, but that by itself is not enough. Society has conferred upon lawyers a unique privilege to practice law, which, in turn, places upon our profession a unique responsibility to society. In short, it is

important for members of the bar to become involved in the community and the profession, to embrace public service and to volunteer for pro bono representation. Not only is this the right thing to do, but we as lawyers have so much to offer. Our profession encompasses special skills and abilities that can be used to address the problems of the day. We may not realize the impact we can have within our communities, and within our profession, by participating, lending support and offering leadership.

Society needs our talents. Alexis de Tocqueville once extolled the contributions and virtues of lawyers, stating "...lawyers...form the highest political class and the most cultivated portion of society...If I were asked where I place American aristocracy, I should reply without hesitation that it occupies the judicial bench and the bar."

Is de Tocqueville's observation relevant today? He was speaking about a bar that was involved in all aspects of American life and had a profound impact on the development of a new nation. It was a bar willing to serve and lead. Many lawyers have followed in this notable tradition but so much more needs to be done. Please lend a hand, your efforts will be greatly appreciated, and you will be among the chief beneficiaries.

Rayman L. Solomon is Dean of Rutgers School of Law-Camden, as well as Chair of the Commission on Professionalism in the Law. Charles J. Hollenbeck is Executive Director of the commission.