

I Double Dare You: My Professionalism Challenge

We as a legal community can get through this difficult time. You can get through this difficult time. If you need help, get help—I double dare you—and know that it is okay to do so.

BY KARLISE Y. GRIER



Sometimes the challenge of professionalism is determining the best course of action among a sea of options in a “gray area” where there is no clear right or wrong answer. More often than not for me, however, during the month of November, professionalism entails simply doing the right thing when I know what is expected of me as a lawyer.

November is always a challenging month for me because it is the month during which my mother died—eight days before my birthday. I’ve still not quite forgiven her for that. November is the month that kicks off the holiday season, and I always have to get through the anniversary of my mother’s death before launching into Thanksgiving and all the holiday cheer that follows. Last year, 2019, was actually a good year for me and I had a busy, guilt-free and happy holiday season from Thanksgiving through the new year. But as 2020 and the 20th anniversary of my mother’s passing dawned, I suspected that this year would be difficult for me. There is something different about those years with the zeros at the end. Grieving as a lawyer can be especially challenging. There is a statement in “A Lawyer’s Creed” and the “Aspirational Statement on Professionalism” that I quite frankly, in all complete honesty, hate. It reads: “As a lawyer, I will aspire: (a) To put fidelity to clients and, through clients, to the common good, before selfish interests.” That is a lot to live up to, and for me especially during the month of November. It seems to strip away my need as a lawyer to be simply human. And yet, I do recognize that there is a harsh truth in the statement that we as lawyers do need to try to aspire to that goal.

My mother encouraged me to open my solo law practice, which I did in February 2000.¹ A few months later she died and I found myself struggling to nurture a fledgling law practice in the midst of grief. Whether I felt like it or not, I still had to show up for court appearances, meet fil-

ing deadlines, answer the phone and talk to people. I had to try and be polite, even when (or especially when) I felt angry for reasons that had nothing to do with my clients, opposing counsel, judges or court staff, or the case. Misleading, painful dreams consisting of my mother still being alive and then waking up to the stark truthful reality of her death were fairly common in those days. I didn't have the option of calling in sick to ask to be excused from a court appearance because I had a painful dream and did not feel like getting out of bed the next morning. Clients were counting on me and to them whatever was happening in court that day was the most important thing in their lives. The right thing to do was to get up, get dressed and strive to look somewhat presentable, make my face as pleasant as possible—and be on time, prepared and polite. I had to set aside my human selfish interests. Being a good lawyer is not easy. Striving to be a good lawyer who aspires to act with professionalism feels almost impossible at times. But we do it. Thousands and thousands of lawyers do it on a regular basis. And in this crazy pandemic year when many lawyers and judges are facing emotional turmoil and challenges I cannot imagine, I still write to encourage you and to say we can get through this difficult time and we can persevere with professionalism.

I write from experience when I say that we as lawyers and judges can get through difficult times and still fulfil our obligations with professionalism. But I also speak from

experience when I say that we cannot always do it alone. I don't often reflect on the November that ended with my mother's unexpected death from a stroke because it is painful. But this year, I feel it is necessary for me to do so, with the hope that it will help other lawyers. The first Tuesday in November 2000, my mother, a retired high school math teacher, had worked as a poll manager at our local polling precinct. Less than three weeks later, she was buried, not yet even knowing who would become president of the United States because of hanging chads. My loss happened just that quickly. Many, many lawyers helped me in countless ways during that difficult time, but 20 years later there are two who I recall specifically asking for help with certain things. One lawyer I called even though she was not a close friend because she worked for a hospital and I had questions about life support. She took my call and told me difficult news that I did not want to hear because I had to hear it. Another lawyer, a friend, came to the hospital even though it was her birthday and handled for me the ordeal of answering questions about my mother's health insurance and how the hospital was going to get paid, while I was trying to absorb the fact that my mother who I had just talked to earlier was in ICU. I truly believe that it is because of that lawyer friend that I am not currently serving a long jail sentence for doing bodily harm to the poor hospital staff lady who was just doing her job. It was a terrible time.

I needed help and when I asked for help, other lawyers were there to help me. After my mother died, I also spent some time in counseling. I write from personal experience when I say we as lawyers sometimes need help that even other lawyers cannot give us. I write from personal experience when I say it is okay for us as lawyers to need help. It is okay for us as lawyers to ask for help. It is okay for us as lawyers to get help. As Georgia lawyers, we are fortunate to have programs like SOLACE, and Lawyers Helping Lawyers and the Lawyer Assistance Program to help us when we need assistance.² Don't be afraid to get the help that is available to us. Whatever your personal November challenge may be, you can get through it, and you can get through it with professionalism. If you are feeling isolated, stressed, anxious, depressed, angry, sad or all of those things, you are not alone in your feelings. Trust me when I tell you that many other lawyers and judges are feeling the same things. We as a legal community can get through this difficult time. You can get through this difficult time. If you need help, get help—I double dare you—and know that it is okay to do so.



Karlise Y. Grier

Executive Director
Chief Justice's Commission
on Professionalism
kygrier@cjcpga.org

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COMMISSION ON PROFESSIONALISM

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