

October 2020

Volume 26, Number 2

GEORGIA BAR

JOURNAL

From the President:
Rest Well,
Notorious R.B.G.

Is Liberal Enforcement
of Noncompetes Still
Good Policy?

Statewide Business
Court Opens Its Doors

Alexa—Stop!: Ethical
Challenges of Working
from Home

Nearly a Decade Later: Surveying
Georgia's "New" Noncompete Law

Professionalism in the Midst of Stress: Show The World Who We Are

Even with all the stress of 2020, many Georgia lawyers and judges have demonstrated remarkable professionalism. On behalf of the Chief Justice’s Commission on Professionalism, I thank you for showing the world who we really are.

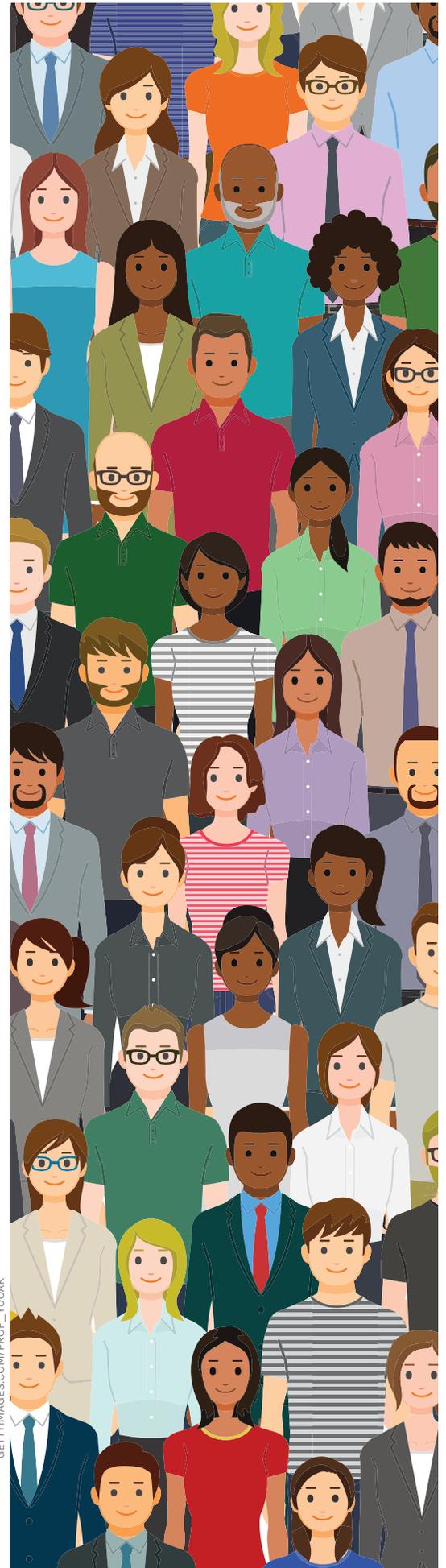
BY KARLISE Y. GRIER

When 2020 began on the first day in January, many people planned for a year that has not existed. Instead, the year has turned into a surreal experience with a COVID-19 pandemic that most of us could never have imagined. For many of us, including both lawyers and judges, the pandemic has created numerous unexpected personal and professional challenges, uncertainty and fear. If a pandemic alone were not enough of a challenge, it arrived during a presidential election year, a time that historically has divided Americans, and during a time when Americans are increasingly discussing issues of race and justice. In the midst of struggling with all of these challenges, we as lawyers and judges have also had to find ways to fulfill obligations to those we serve. In short, for a myriad of reasons, 2020 has been a stressful year for many of us in the legal community.

I have been disheartened by some of the responses to the stress caused by this current climate. For example, a few days before I wrote this article, I came across a public post on social media in which several attorneys called a group of at-

torneys “racists” because the group supported a particular presidential candidate. As I read all of the comments (more than 200 of them), many of which were made by attorneys that I personally know, and some of whom held leadership positions in the profession, I was personally saddened and disappointed. I was saddened and disappointed to see attorneys publicly attacking one another, sometimes using profane language, on a public page, one that any current or potential client, judge, law student or other member of the public could access. I would have been equally saddened and disappointed if the page were “private.” We, as lawyers and judges, are a professional community. *We are better than this*, I thought, and I did not believe that any of the comments I saw on social media had shown the world who we are as a *community of legal professionals*.

If we as lawyers were not stuck in our homes with very limited in-person, face-to-face interaction because of the pandemic, would we say such things to one another? Did the lawyers who posted the comments consider that they represented not only themselves but the organizations



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that they serve (whether volunteer or paid), and the legal profession as a whole? In an example from my own life, during the pre-pandemic days when I would go to church or Bible study, I was often addressed as “Attorney Grier” instead of by my first name. In other words, even in my personal life, I still represented the profession to which I belong.

In “A Lawyer’s Creed and the Aspirational Statement on Professionalism,” lawyers and judges are encouraged to reflect on the idea of how they present themselves, both personally and professionally, as shown in the following statements:

- To preserve the dignity and the integrity of our profession by my conduct. The dignity and the integrity of our profession is an inheritance that must be maintained by each successive generation of lawyers.¹
- To model for others, and particularly for my clients, the respect due to those we call upon to resolve our disputes and the regard due to *all participants* in our dispute resolution processes.²

- Be courteous and civil in *all* communications.³
- To consider the effect of my conduct on the image of our systems of justice.⁴

As I wrote this article, self-isolating by sitting in my home alone to help fight COVID-19, I committed to more diligently reflect on and strive to live according to the aspirational goals listed above. I committed to being more thoughtful about what I say and how I say it, whether in correspondence, virtual conferences, hearings, on social media or (when the time comes) face to face. And as I wrote, I hoped each Georgia lawyer and judge would join me in doing the same.

Nevertheless, as I reflected on what has transpired thus far this year, I was also truly inspired and heartened by the acts of professionalism of many Georgia lawyers and judges. The judiciary, led by Chief Justice Harold D. Melton, quickly responded to the pandemic in March, issuing a series of Judicial Emergency Orders. In May, the Judicial Council of Georgia, chaired by Chief Justice Melton, established the Judicial COVID-19

Task Force to address the challenges of ensuring access to the courts in the midst of the pandemic. Both civil and criminal lawyers, who often take opposing sides in court cases, worked with one another and with judges from across the state to develop a Georgia Court Reopening Guide.⁵ The State Bar of Georgia established a committee to identify and address issues with the delivery of legal services resulting from the pandemic. Georgia's 9th Annual Legal Food Frenzy, spearheaded by Attorney General Chris Carr and the Young Lawyers Division of the State Bar of Georgia, raised a record-breaking \$852,090 as a result of the contributions of more than 220 law firms, legal organizations, in-house counsel and courts across Georgia,⁶ even while law firms and other organizations were cutting hours and pay.⁷

In April, June and August, the Chief Justice's Commission on Professionalism (Commission) provided five free professionalism CLEs to help attorneys learn how to address the rapidly changing legal environment during the pandemic with professionalism.⁸ The combined total attendance reported for all five CLEs was more than 5,200 attendees.⁹ The CLE in April, "Moving Forward with Professionalism In the Midst of A Public Health Emergency," contained numerous mental health resources that attorneys could use to help themselves and their clients during these stressful times.¹⁰ The CLEs were made possible because of the hard work and dedication of Chief Justice Melton; several Commission members and advisors, including Justice Sarah Hawkins Warren, Hon. Clyde Reese, Hon. Susan Edlein, State Bar President-Elect Elizabeth Fite, Rebecca Grist, YLD President Bert Hummel, State Bar President Dawn M. Jones and Claudia Saari; and numerous other lawyers and judges who served as CLE panelists and planners.

Further, the Commission continued with its regular work. In August, the State

Bar of Georgia Committee on Professionalism (COP), with staff support from the Commission, organized the 28th Law School Orientations on Professionalism (Orientations). A total of 200 lawyers and judges served as leaders facilitating small group discussions among more than 1,000 mostly 1L students about professionalism and how professionalism applies in law school. Because of the pandemic, all group leaders participated virtually regardless of which of the five Georgia law schools at which they volunteered, and the Orientations were again a great success, despite physical distancing. The Commission was grateful to the law students and COP members who helped to refine the Orientations' hypothetical problems; the volunteer lawyers and judges who served as group leaders; and the law school professors and administrators who created a new paradigm for hosting the Orientations.

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Endnotes

1. Chief Justice's Commission on Professionalism, *A Lawyer's Creed and Aspirational Statement on Professionalism* at Lines 64 – 66.
2. *Id.* at Lines 51 – 53 (emphasis added).
3. *Id.* at Line 108 (emphasis added).
4. *Id.* at Line 157.
5. *Georgia Court Reopening Guide* (visited September 18, 2020) <https://georgiacourts.gov/wp-content/>

uploads/2020/06/Georgia-Court-Reopening-Guide-FINAL.pdf.

6. Georgia Legal Food Frenzy, *How It Works, Awards* (visited September 4, 2020) <https://galegalfoodfrenzy.org/how-it-works/awards/>.
7. See, e.g., Jonathan Ringel, *Hard Realities: As Firms Cut Pay, Food Banks Need More Help Than Ever*, DAILY REPORT (April 15, 2020) <https://www.law.com/dailyreportonline/2020/04/15/hard-realities-as-firms-cut-pay-food-banks-need-more-help-than-ever/>.
8. For complete information regarding speakers, panelists, and program materials, see Chief Justice's Commission on Professionalism, *Professionalism During A Time of Physical Distancing*, <http://cjcpga.org/popup040620/> (CLE date of April 6, 2020); Chief Justice's Commission on Professionalism, *Getting the Deal Done with Professionalism During A Time of Physical Distancing*, <http://cjcpga.org/popup041620/> (CLE date of April 16, 2020); Chief Justice's Commission on Professionalism, *Moving Forward with Professionalism In the Midst of A Public Health Emergency*, <http://cjcpga.org/moving-forward/> (CLE date of April 28, 2020); Chief Justice's Commission on Professionalism, *Criminal Justice, Professionalism, and Coronavirus*, https://criminal_justice_professionalism_coronavirus.eventbrite.com (CLE date of June 11, 2020); 5) Chief Justice's Commission on Professionalism, *Professionalism and the Georgia Court Reopening Guide*, <http://cjcpga.org/reopening-guide/> (CLE date of August 7, 2020).
9. CLE attendance number is the number of attorneys who attended each CLE for CLE credit and counts some individual attorneys more than one time, if the attorney attended multiple CLEs.
10. Mental health resources are available on the Commission's website at <http://cjcpga.org/moving-forward/>.