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Who Better to Lead Than Lawyers?

Lawyers have a special role within society that uniquely qualifies them to lead—and they owe it to others to do so.

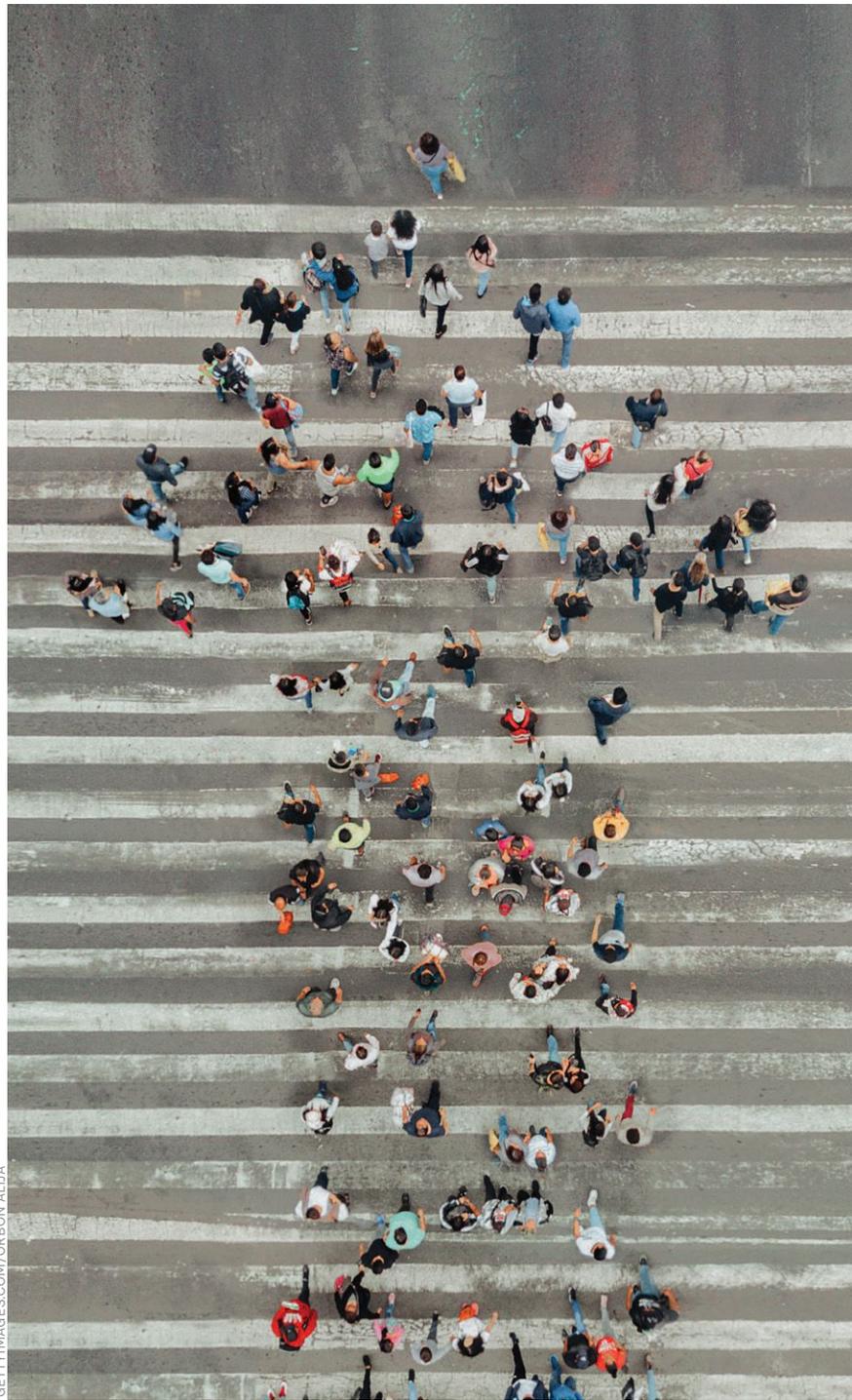
BY KARLISE Y. GRIER

I often find myself drawn to a transcription of proceedings of a Consultation on Professionalism convened by Chief Justice Thomas O. Marshall and hosted by Emory University President James Laney on March 31, 1988. I think there are many words of wisdom in the transcript. The Consultation on Professionalism—which brought together a distinguished group of lawyers and judges from around the state—may have been the first gathering of its kind to discuss professionalism. Recently, after hearing Judge Dorothy Beasley speak at the 2022 annual meeting of the Georgia Association for Women Lawyers, I found myself once again rereading the 1988 transcript because Beasley posed the question, “Who better to lead than lawyers?”

Beasley’s questions reminded me of some observations made by attorney Felker Ward at the 1988 consultation. An excerpt of his remarks is as follows:

I have concluded that we as lawyers are something kind of special. First of all, I concluded that from some of the reading materials that Chief Justice Marshall sent us. As I read through them and stopped and thought about it, I said, you know, we *are* special. We have a lot of influence over what happens in this society.

Then I was reminded of my days in law school here at Emory. We had one of the outstanding lawyers of our country, Melvin Belli, come out here and talk to us. I will never forget it. He gave us some sta-



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tistics showing that if you take the education and income of a lawyer and compare them to the rest of the country, we are almost a pinpoint. We are such a small class by so many measures that it constitutes almost an imperceptible percentage in our society. When I combined Mr. Belli’s point with the perception that people have of us out there in the world and with the genuine influence we have, I was forced to conclude again that we are a special lot. ... I suggest to you that if we are special, as I’ve been led to believe that we are, then we have a responsibility to do something. The best way to do something is to teach by example. While our words may pass away, we can, by our actions, set lasting examples and enduring standards for society as a whole.¹

The fact that lawyers should lead and act in various roles in our society was a theme that was often reiterated in the early years of Georgia’s professionalism movement. Former Supreme Court of Georgia Chief Justice Harold G. Clarke wrote in a 1989 article:

In a positive sense, lawyers owe the public the debt of service and leadership. Service generally takes a form of pro bono legal work, because the needs of the deprived lie waiting for the service of the more fortunate.

The grand tradition of the legal profession insists that lawyers not shrink from leadership roles. By nature and training, lawyers possess qualities which uniquely fit them for positions of leadership in both the public and private sector. From the very beginnings of our republic, Americans have looked to lawyers for leadership. Some evidence indicates the setting of the sun on this tradition. Fewer and fewer lawyers offer to serve as public officials, and it even seems that lawyers are volunteering less frequently to lead in civic and charitable activity. At least one reason for this unfortunate development is the explosion of cost in the operation of a law practice which makes time an enormously valuable commodity. With respect to public office, another reason is the tendency on the part of some persons to distrust lawyers and therefore diminish their electability. Perhaps the best way to regain lost trust is to reassert our willingness to serve and lead.²

We are fortunate that within our Georgia legal community, there are many opportunities to gain leadership training through programs such as the State Bar of Georgia’s Young Lawyers Division Leadership Academy or through one of the leadership or public office training academies of the voluntary bar associations. In his 1988 remarks, Ward

challenged his audience to act regarding the lack of diversity in large law firms. While the issue of large law firm diversity is an issue that perhaps does not resonate with everyone who reads this article, I would wager that there is at least one issue that you care about, and like Ward, I challenge you to take action. We as lawyers owe it to others to lead because we have a special role within our society that uniquely qualifies us to lead. So, like Beasley, I ask: “Who better to lead than lawyers?” ●



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Endnotes

1. Proceedings of a Consultation on Professionalism and the Practice of Law, Chief Justices Commission on Professionalism, Professionalism Then (1988) and Now (2019) <http://cjcpga.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/1988-ConsultationOnProf.pdf> (Last visited June 24, 2022).
2. Harold G. Clarke, *Professionalism: Repaying the Debt*, 25 Ga. St. B. J. 170 (1989), <http://cjcpga.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/25-GSBJ-170-1989-Professionalism-Repaying-the-Debt.-Harold-Clarke-ethics-minimum.pdf>.