

June 2021

Volume 26, Number 6

GEORGIA BAR

# JOURNAL

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No. It Does Not  
(Speak for Itself, That Is).

# Space and Grace: Continue the Conversation on Unparalleled Unity

The Commission encourages lawyers to continue this conversation or start one of their own, beginning with getting to know someone who might think differently than they do.

BY KARLISE Y. GRIER

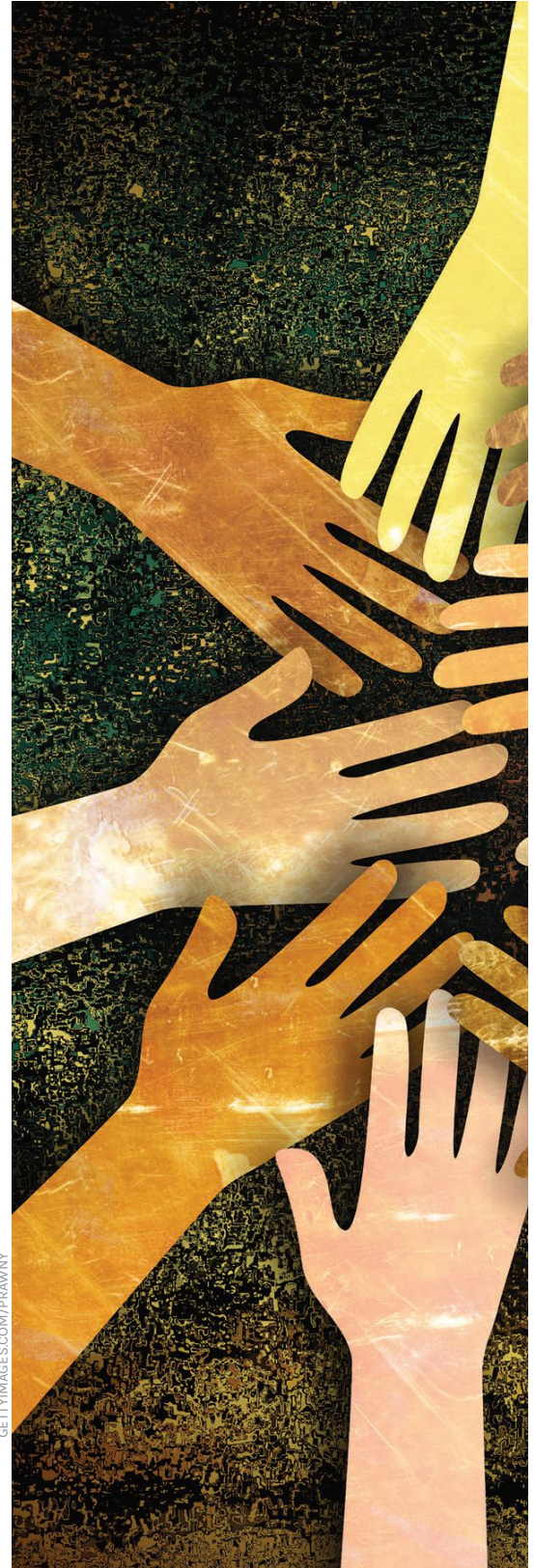
On March 19, the Chief Justice's Commission on Professionalism convened a CLE of approximately 1,600 lawyers and judges to discuss whether lawyers can lead efforts, using the tools of professionalism, to bridge the political, racial and social divisions in America. In advance of the CLE, a diverse panel of lawyers and judges<sup>1</sup> submitted written responses to a series of questions, which served as the framework for discussion. Each panelist was asked to introduce themselves in the context of a Commission "Calling to Task," which is part of the Commission's mission statement,<sup>2</sup> and also discussed what "unparalleled unity" meant to each of them, sharing their responses to the questions submitted to them in advance.<sup>3</sup>

As she shared her answer about the meaning of "unparalleled unity," Justice Carla Wong McMillian spoke about the values and goals that lawyers and judges share, many of which are set forth in *A Lawyers Creed* and the *Aspirational Statement on Professionalism*.<sup>4</sup> Hon. Nina Marquette Baker discussed the importance of

lawyers using an elevated level of civility. She shared that, during one of her first cases as a new lawyer, she had a cup of coffee with an older colleague who taught her that being a lawyer isn't about fighting—it is about trying to find some common ground. Baker went on to highlight the work of the State Bar of Georgia's Seeking Equal Justice and Addressing Racism & Racial Bias Committee, which has instituted a series of "Courageous Conversations" under the leadership of State Bar President Dawn M. Jones.

On the subject of conversations, Ashley Bell discussed his thoughts on having a constructive conversation with others when they ascribe to different "factual records."

"History matters," said Bell. "If you don't understand how we get to certain points, people from different backgrounds are automatically dealing with a different set of facts. ... I keep books near me. If someone comes to me and says, 'I don't understand something,' I give them a book. Once I have given someone infor-



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“As leaders, lawyers have the opportunity and ability to speak up for others who may not be able to speak up for themselves. Lawyers need to do so.”—Justice Carla Wong McMillian

mation, the choice is theirs whether they take the information and learn a different perspective. You can’t help people who choose not to learn.”

Jake Evans stressed the importance of including all voices in making decisions, even if someone else’s opinion might be painful for a person with differing views to hear. “Seek first to understand then to be understood,” suggested Evans.

Additionally, Hon. Dax López shared what it means to have courage in the face of injustice or inequality, saying, “Sometimes it’s easier to sit silently and let others engage in the difficult conversations. ... I will say the things that other people also want to say and don’t, and then I will get these private texts saying, ‘Hey, I agree with you,’ or ‘Great job,’ or ‘Thanks for saying what you said.’ ... Thanks for the affirmation, but I would rather others step out on that limb with me and not just leave it for me and others to have the hard conversations. If you believe it and you agree with it, have the courage to step up and say it.”

Patrise M. Perkins-Hooker expressed that a starting point for unparalleled unity was for lawyers to lead the way in helping everyone to “view one another as people. ... The civility and respect all [panelists] mentioned begins with seeing one another as people—not as subservient people, not as lesser people, not as inferior people. We need to start looking at each other as people.” Doing so, she reiterated, would introduce a different, unparalleled method lawyers could use to promote unity.

Panelists also addressed whether silence was a valid professionalism option. Justice McMillian responded that silence was a good thing “when you are listening.” She asserted that lawyers are leaders in their spheres of influence, saying, “As leaders, lawyers have the opportunity and ability to speak up for others who may not be able to speak up for themselves. Lawyers need to do so.” In one example, McMillian highlighted the rise of anti-Asian harassment in the United States over the

# A Thank You to Chief Justice Harold D. Melton

From Commission members, advisors and staff, we thank Chief Justice Melton for his leadership in professionalism.

**“I have had the privilege of knowing Chief Justice Melton since 1996. He was a section leader in the Georgia Attorney General’s Office under Michael J. Bowers when I began work there after graduation from law school. I have considered him a career mentor since that time. He epitomizes everything there is regarding grace, class, leadership and professionalism. His service to the state of Georgia is to be highly praised.”—Hon. Clyde L. Reese III**

**“A Lawyer’s Creed states, ‘As to my colleagues in the practice of law, I will aspire to respect the needs of others, especially the need to develop as a whole person.’ Chief Justice Melton has demonstrated an exemplary commitment to promote overall lawyer wellness. Working with him the last five years on the SOLACE, Attorney Wellness, and Suicide Awareness & Prevention committees of the State Bar of Georgia, and more recently on the Chief Justice’s Commission on Professionalism, I witnessed Chief Justice Melton’s compassion and kindness towards all members of the Bar.”—Hon. Shondeana Morris**

**“I have long admired Chief Justice Melton’s respect for those of us non-lawyers who are part of the Commission. He embodies professionalism by regarding lay members with equal respect, viewing us as peers rather than insignificant voices. He has always been welcoming, inclusive and appreciative, regularly seeking our input on issues that impact the justice system—even beyond the Commission’s work. As in the *Aspirational Statement on Professionalism*, Chief Justice Melton clearly strives to make ‘the law, the legal system and other dispute resolution processes available to all.’”  
—Jennifer Davis Ward**

**“A principle that animates the legal profession is it is one of service, as A Lawyer’s Creed reminds us. Chief Justice Melton is the absolute embodiment of this principle. He has dedicated his time and many talents—and, indeed, his entire legal career—to serving the public and our system of justice. When he leaves the bench, we will miss his presence, but his service to the people of Georgia will be a legacy that we will not forget.”—Justice Sarah Hawkins Warren**

**“Justice Melton epitomizes A Lawyer’s Creed and those characteristics recognized therein: honesty, civility, candor and courtesy. Not only that, but he truly has dedicated his life to the service of the public, the profession and the legal system. He is an example to us all and the embodiment of professionalism.”  
—President-Elect Elizabeth L. Fite**

**“Early in the pandemic, my 11-year-old son heard Chief Justice Melton speaking at one of our Commission meetings. He asked who he was, and I explained that he was the chief justice of the Supreme Court of Georgia. Throughout the meeting, my son sat at my door and watched, in awe of how Justice Melton spoke. He inspired a middle-schooler that day, not just because of his title or the color of his skin, but because of the content of his character. He is a formidable inspiration to me, my son and countless others; for that, I am grateful.”  
—Adwoa Ghartey-Tagoe Seymour**

past year, including in Atlanta. “Asian attorneys in Atlanta who are being harassed are our friends and colleagues,” she said. “We should not stand by and remain silent but try to do something about it.” McMillian referred the audience to a list of resources for those interested in learning more about speaking out against anti-Asian harassment.<sup>5</sup>

Prof. Tanya Washington summarized the discussion with the phrase “Space and grace,” saying, “We all require it, and we all should give it. ... We all need the space to speak honestly, and we also all need the grace to hear without attacking others even as we respond with our own opinions.”

During his closing remarks, Chief Justice Harold D. Melton expressed that he was heartened by the discussion. “We as lawyers have the skillset to do what we are talking about doing, even though it is a huge challenge. ... [Seeking] unparalleled unity doesn’t mean we agree, but it does mean we can disagree and yet understand that we can still be brothers and sisters.” He added, “I hope we all look at the role we play and not look at [having the difficult conversations] as something for somebody else to do.”

The Commission encourages lawyers to continue this conversation or start one of their own, beginning with getting to know someone who might think differ-

ently than they do. López and McMillian both emphasized the importance of getting to know people on a human level first before you begin having the hard conversations. McMillian noted, “It is hard to cancel someone out if you know their heart.”

If your bar association or legal organization wants to hold a conversation on a group level, you are invited to use the Commission’s questions to get you started; simply contact the Commission to let us know that you are using the materials. To view the “Unparalleled Unity” CLE and all its written materials, visit the Commission’s website at [cjcpga.org/unity-cle](http://cjcpga.org/unity-cle).



**“I first met Chief Justice Melton** when I began serving on the Chief Justice’s Commission on Professionalism, and I’ve gotten to know him through many conversations. I love and appreciate his humor, his humanness and the way in which he has led the Supreme Court of Georgia, working closely with not just the Commission, but also with the Executive Committee of the State Bar, the Georgia Association of Criminal Defense Lawyers, and undoubtedly all of the individuals and groups he touches.”—**Nicki Vaughan**

**“Part of the Aspirational Statement** on *Professionalism* reads, ‘I will aspire ... [to] assist my colleagues become better people in the practice of law.’ Chief Justice Melton has taught me that part of being a good leader is striving to find a pathway to get to ‘yes,’ even though it might be easier to say ‘no.’ He demonstrates joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. I thank him for his inspired and courageous leadership.”  
—**Karlise Y. Grier**

**“Chief Justice Melton is the epitome** of professionalism in thought, word and deed. His grace and dignity inspire attorneys across this state, as does the diplomacy he demonstrates in his interactions with everyone. Over the course of this most difficult year and in the midst of a tragic pandemic, it is difficult to imagine a finer leader to have been our guide. I am honored to call him Chief, but more importantly, I am honored to call him my friend.”—**Justice Shawn Ellen LaGrua**

**“Chief Melton once told me, ‘Our** most effective tool as a lawyer is who we are as a person, and we must bring this tool into everything we do.’ His tool box is filled with integrity, faithfulness and fairness, but I believe humility is the glue that holds it all together. Justice Melton—or simply ‘Harold’—treats people with dignity, courtesy and respect. To me, that encompasses the true meaning of professionalism.”—**Maria Mackay**

**“Our Lawyer’s Creed provides, ‘To the** public and our systems of justice, I offer service.’ Chief Justice Melton embodies so much that is right about our profession: he offers trusted ethical and professional guidance; he is collaborative and thoughtful in his decision-making; he has always been gracious with his time and offered to lend advice to young attorneys; and he has been intentional in shaping our profession for the better, especially during the pandemic. It has been an honor to work with him, and I am thankful for his years of service to the Bar, our profession and Georgia.”  
—**YLD President Bert Hummel**

**“Chief Justice Harold D. Melton: honor-**able, compassionate, egalitarian and inscrutable. He is, for me, the ‘Justice of Cool.’”—**Monica Willis-Parker, MD**

Whatever form it takes, continue the conversation with space and grace. ●



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**Endnotes**

1. Carla Wong McMillian, justice, Supreme Court of Georgia; Hon. Nina Markette Baker, judge, Superior Court, Coweta Judicial Circuit; Ashley Bell, partner, Dentons US LLP; Jake Evans, partner, Holland & Knight LLP; Hon. Dax E.

López, judge, State Court of DeKalb County; and Patrise M. Perkins-Hooker, past president, State Bar of Georgia, and administrative partner, Johnson & Freeman, LLC. Prof. Tanya M. Washington (Georgia State University College of Law, Center for Access to Justice) served as the panel moderator. Dawn M. Jones, president, State Bar of Georgia, brought greetings, and Chief Justice Harold D. Melton, Supreme Court of Georgia, gave the concluding remarks. Kevin C. Wilson, staff attorney at the Supreme Court of Georgia, was instrumental in planning the CLE.

2. The “Calling to Tasks” are part of the Commission’s mission statement found at [cjcpga.org/mission](http://cjcpga.org/mission).

3. See <<http://cjcpga.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Cover-Page-and-Speaker-Prepared-Responses.pdf>>.

4. See <<http://cjcpga.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/2-Lawyers-CreedAspStatement-v-2013-Line-Number-with-new-logo-and-seal-v07-25-19.pdf>>.

5. See <<http://cjcpga.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/RESOURCES-TO-ADDRESS-ANTI-ASIAN-HARASSMENT.pdf>>.